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THE IMPACT OF CULTURAL & INTERCULTURAL COMPETENCE AWARENESS PROGRAMS ON ESL SCHOLARSHIP CANDIDATES ABROAD

Abstract:

Nowadays, many students are granted a scholarship to study abroad. However, meeting the required score in IELTS or TOEFL is a must in order to be accepted in most universities abroad. A considerable number of students (if not the majority) have to take the ESL program in the target country in order to be fully accepted for their major. Due to a lack of intercultural competence, many of those students find difficulties in living in a different country, and interacting with others. Therefore, the pace of their language learning tends to be slow, or interrupted.

In addition to the linguistic barriers, social, cultural, and religious barriers may also impede the process of ESL acquisition and learning.

This paper will emphasize the impact of cultural and intercultural competence awareness programs that must be provided to those learners in their own country before they embark on their studies abroad. This research will also shed light on how intercultural competence as well as the concept of identity can be used as a vehicle towards a better understanding and accepting the other, thereby assisting in the internationalization of some cultural concepts. It will also draw the teachers' attention on how to improve their students' overall output in the target language and focus more on the importance of cross-cultural competence in the area of EFL/ESL learning. This is essential, given the nature of language learning in and of itself, which chief aim is to build up the learner's awareness of self-identity, and communicate with other cultures in a more effective way.

Keywords:

Awareness Programs, Scholarship, ESL

Introduction

Upon recent years in most educational institutions, there is a variety of scholarship programs offered by the government to young graduate students. However, these students themselves, eager to go overseas and explore the external world, most of the time find it too difficult to cope up with the norms and regulations of the foreign culture they face. One of the obstacles that these students encounter is the 'culture shock'. The causes of that culture shock can be related to several different sources. Hence, three major sources might be related to:

- a) The English textbooks and course materials used in language programs;
- b) absence of cultural awareness programs for scholarship candidates; or
- c) lack of intercultural competence skills among scholarship candidates.

A great deal of human relationships and communication is based on cultural ties and cross-cultural reciprocal exchanged ideas and understandings. These complicated processes within which we all act as individuals and as groups, are most probably (and to a great extent) based on the individuals' desire to live in a more civilized living status within different communities. However, cultural awareness imposes itself as one of the fundamental constituents of our existence as social beings. The following part of this research is an attempt to show the impact of incorporating the cultural awareness programs on students who are ready to embark on studying abroad; as well as the impact of incorporating the cultural component in the English as a Foreign Language (EFL) curricula and syllabi, to illustrate the benefits of being aware of the learner's linguistic and cultural background. The research also employs tactics in helping teachers improve their students' overall output in the target language and focus more on the importance of *Cross-cultural Competence* (CCC) among EFL learners. This is essential, given the nature of language learning in and of itself, which has the chief aim of communicating with other cultures.

Besides the idea of culture and identity, the study will also address the following questions:

- a) EFL/ESL textbooks and the cultural components
- b) Aspects of the notion of 'culture'
- c) Identity in relation to EFL/ESL learners
- d) 'Intercultural Competence' in EFL/ESL settings

- e) The need for cultural awareness programs
- f) Integration of cultural awareness programs and EFL learner's intercultural competence development
- g) Prior to their departure to study abroad, to what extent should the focus be on the learners' First Language (L1) or Second Language (L2) culture?

1. - Clarification:

Before embarking on this issue, a definition of the most important terms reoccurring in this topic seems vital.

1.2 - The cultural component in relation to EFL/ESL textbooks:

The 'Cultural Component', often referred to as the 'Cultural Element' in the literature related to EFL textbooks and culture, is a broad term that needs to be defined. Moreover, cultural components are the number of cultural elements recycled, manifested or represented throughout a textbook (when dealing with language teaching). However, cultural components are not limited to language teaching only, but rather in almost every piece of writing as a literary or non-literary product and used in any setting. In other words, cultural components are a sum of refined interwoven features that make a piece of writing very specific to a particular community or society. In this regard, we can say that cultural components can be tied up, but not limited to a long range of components that may include: *language and communication style; food and drinks; clothing; music and dance; happiness and sorrow; health beliefs* (i.e. what people in the community believe causes disease and what should be done about it); *family relationships*, such as marriage laws and ways of celebration; *gender roles; religion; status* – e.g. what gives prestige; *politics; power* – how does one gain/lose power; *identity and pride; prejudices; shared history; geography; monuments*; and so on (Benahnia, 2012)

It is evident that the list of components can be longer than what we have stated above, and the definition of culture is definitely broader than that scope (for a broader list of components, see Benahnia (1992), for example).

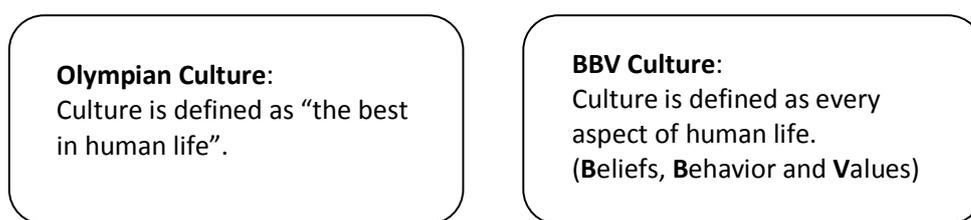
1.3 - Aspects of the notion of 'culture':

In addition to the above mentioned various aspects of culture, there are different views among scholars to how to define culture. Some scholars tend to attribute a holistic (vs. detailed) signification to this term summing up all different characteristics of culture under one umbrella term; while others insist that somehow there must be a separation showing at least the main puzzles that form culture. According to Chamberlain (2005), for example, 'culture' represents "the values, norms, and traditions that affect how individuals of a particular group perceive, think, interact, behave, and make judgments about their world" (p197). In other words, culture is more ancient than civilization, i.e. culture began when language began, and this could have been more than a million years ago; whereas civilization began when agriculture began probably not more than a few thousand years ago. The opposite of culture then is death and "annihilation"; whereas the opposite of civilization is" ... savagery" (cited in Lafayette, 1976, p22, and mentioned in Benahnia, 2012).

Moreover, for other scholars, such as O'Neil (2006), for example, the word 'culture' "has many different meanings. For some, it refers to an appreciation of good literature, music, art, and food. For a biologist, it is likely to be a colony of bacteria or other microorganisms growing in a nutrient medium in a laboratory Petri dish. However, for anthropologists and other behavioral scientists, **culture is the full range of learned human behavior patterns**" (p1). We have to note here that since Tylor's time, the concept of culture has become the central focus of anthropology. O'Neil also argues that "Applied linguistics is an interdisciplinary field of study that identifies, investigates, and offers solutions to language-related real life problems. Some of the academic fields related to applied linguistics are education, linguistics, psychology, anthropology, and sociology. Critiques to this naturalized approach to culture include Hall's (2002) view that culture should be perceived socio-culturally meaning both social and cultural factors should be involved. Socio-cultural practice is not a set of pre-defined descriptors about a group of people. And based on this argument, O'Neil believes that from this standpoint, culture "emerges in people's social lives and consequently particular cultural groups should not be seen as well-defined, homogeneous and static entities whose members share fixed meanings" (ibid). Along the same lines, Street (1993) has claimed that 'culture' is a verb (i.e. it "is an active process of meaning making")(p25) and consequently, according to O'Neil (?), research should focus not on what culture is, but on what it does as regards people's ways of making sense of the world (including their perceptions of the self and others)." This also includes the process itself

of becoming aware of the relationships in culture and how it is interwoven. Moreover, Williams (1983) admits that culture is “one of the most complicated words in the English language” (p87), especially when moving beyond the mainstream focus of culture learning as information about the other. The meaning of culture can also be summarized in the following definition given by Nelson Brooks (1975) and stated in Lafayette (1976):

Fig. 1 Brooks’ (1975) definition of ‘culture’ as stated in Benahnia (2012):



Bearing in mind what we said before regarding the holistic vs. detailed approaches regarding the significance of culture, the above definition by Brooks seems holistic, yet much broader and easy to retain. However, as mentioned before, it is not the only definition that applies to EFL teaching. Hence, it can serve as a great model or guideline in structuring the distribution and frequency of the cultural elements while developing EFL textbooks or curricula. If carefully structured, the textbook can embody well balanced sufficient amounts of cultural elements that would reflect the learner’s L1 culture, as well as the target language culture. This may in turn serve as culture awareness motor or trigger for most language learners.

2- Identity in relation to EFL/ESL learners:

It is very common, to an extent, that whenever the term ‘*identity*’ is mentioned, it is directly associated with ‘culture’. However, and like the notion of culture, the concept of ‘identity’ does not tend to have a single full-fledged definition known to everybody. For example, one of the common definitions of the term ‘Identity’ stated in Merriam Webster Learner’s Dictionary, ‘*Identity*’ reads as follows:

The qualities, beliefs, etc., that make a particular person or group different from others. As children grow, they establish their own identities.

This definition goes further to elaborate that we can also say that a person insisted on having his or her own *identity* [on being known for his or her own qualities, achievements, etc.].

On the other hand, identity is also often associated with *personality*. People who seem to lack individual identity might tend to not having a strong feeling about exactly the kind of people they are. Moreover, in various occasions we hear people, for example, saying “his/her art reflects his/her cultural/racial identity”. Karl Perera, the owner and author of more-selfesteem.com website summarizes the broad notion of identity in the following eight questions:”

- 1 *Who are you?*
- 2 *What makes you unique?*
- 3 *What are your values?*
- 4 *Your physical identity (what you think you look like to others) also known as body image.*
- 5 *Your internal identity (who you think you are in terms of your personality and character, values, etc.).*
- 6 *How you see yourself in relation to others?*
- 7 *How you identify yourself in terms of your job?*
- 8 *Your personal goals.*

Ties between an individual and his or her relatives, social circle, tribe, or nation are also another aspect of identity. In other words, the notion of identity becomes broader once it is associated with one’s tribe, nationality, or country of origin. Language teachers are often exposed to issues related to identity, especially when it comes to academic writing. Since early stages of EFL learning, you might notice the over-use of the pronoun “*I*” in the writing of some of your students. Literature in this regard shows that this phenomenon of the over-use of the pronoun “*I*” is much more apparent in some nations than others, and it is more common among male learners than female, i.e. nations that are male dominated, such as in some countries of the Middle East

(see John, 2009, for example). Moreover, we must note that identity formation is a complex process by itself, especially in target language (TL) learning situations, as it is explained by Norton (1997): “In the case of L2 learning, the identity process can be complicated by the facts that learners are under the influence of two cultural systems whose values can be extremely different from each other. Moreover, the construction of identity cannot be separated from identity negotiation in which an individual seeks for the answer to the question, ‘who am I’ and for his/her relationship to the world” (cited in Lin, 2009, p44).

3 - Intercultural Competence in relation to EFL/ESL settings:

An important question that one may ask is as follows: Is intercultural competence something innate, or is it a skill that can be acquired? Fantini (2000) views ‘intercultural competence’ as “transcending the limitations of one’s own world view” (p31). For some other scholars, such as Antoinette Camilleri Grima, ‘cultural competence’ refers to “an ability to interact effectively with people of different cultures” (ibid, stated in Benahnia 2012).

In addition, cultural competence may also be associated with diversity. In other words, if we look at diversity within an organizational community, cultural competence would seem vital to every employee to ensure work continuity and survival. From the perspective of real communication among employees and administration, a diverse culture understanding would be a necessity for the entire institution. Diversity must be prevalent and valued before one may be considered culturally competent or before we may say that we do have a diversity competent organization. We have to note also that due to the nature of the modern world and technologies we live in nowadays, cultural competence is becoming increasingly necessary for work, home, as well as community social lives.

Historically speaking, it is not surprising to note that the healthcare profession was the first to promote cultural competence in its field. Poor medical procedures and prescriptions could result in bad consequences due to lack of cultural misunderstanding.

Diversity Training University International (DTUI) isolated four cognitive components related to intercultural competence, which in turn has direct impacts on the individual’s identity: *awareness, attitude, knowledge, and skills*.

Bearing in mind the above-mentioned characteristics, we can say that developing cultural competence results in an ability to understand one's own culture and the other cultures, communicate with other people, and effectively interact with people across cultures. Attitude as well as knowledge and skills seem to be crucial for the existence of intercultural competence. It is possible to advocate then, that part of intercultural competence can be (to an extent) innate when it is associated with personality and biological growth; while the other part of it might be acquired as a skill when it comes to individual surroundings and skills for survival.

Resistance to accepting and dealing with people from other cultures might definitely impede the process of acquisition of knowledge and skills of such faculty, characteristics, or ICC talents. One may ask another question: What happens in case of absence of intercultural competence in the process of learning? The answer is that this may lead to negative consequences and impacts at different levels where learning might take place. One of those negative consequences is what may happen in the world of business. For example, the lack of cultural competence might damage an individual's self-esteem and even his or her career, "but the unobservable psychological impact on the victims can go largely unnoticed until the threat of a class action suit brings them to light" (Martin & Vaughn, 2007).

As mentioned in Benahnia (2012), if we take the above-mentioned argument further, we can say that the talent of being competent might be innate, but the skills of how to be culturally competent can be acquired. Furthermore, not all people possess the skills and talents of how to deal with people from other cultures. By the same token, not all members of a community tend to be aware of their own identity characteristics and constituents. Yet, there might be a large segment of the population in each community that were born with this innate faculty or ability of understanding the other cultures well and communicating with people across cultures, as stated by Mercedes Martin and Billy E. Vaughn:

"While a few individuals seem to be born with cultural competence, the rest of us have had to put considerable effort into developing it. This means examining our biases and prejudices, developing cross-cultural skills, searching for role models, and spending as much time as possible with other people who share a passion for cultural competence. The term multicultural competence surfaced in a mental

health publication by psychologist Paul Pedersen (1988) at least a decade before the term cultural competence became popular. Most of the definitions of cultural competence shared among diversity professionals come from the healthcare industry. Their perspective is useful in the broader context of diversity work.” (Martin & Vaughn, 2007, mentioned in Benahnia, 2012)

It seems evident then to admit, at this point, that there will be no culture without communication, as Ngugi (1986) advocates:

“Communication creates culture: culture is a means of communication. Language carries culture, and culture carries, particularly through orature and literature, the entire body of values by which we come to perceive ourselves and our place in the world.”(cited in Sercombe, (pp. 15-16, and mentioned in Benahnia, 2012)

To conclude this section, let us not forget that intercultural *in*competence is a severe problem that might have negative impacts on the individual’s personality, attitude, achievement, and communication with others. In the case of intercultural incompetence situation, the individual might face the following feelings, either on his own, or he might notice them through his or her interlocutor. These feelings might be: *surprise, discomfort, irritation, shock, anger, losing face, humor, fear, or intimidation.*

4- The need for cultural awareness programs and EFL learner’s intercultural competence development:

The question that is posed at this stage is this: how can the integration of cultural awareness programs help in the development of the EFL learner’s intercultural competence?

The main argument of this section is based on a case study (done by the author on six EFL/ESL textbooks used in Morocco; three ESL textbooks from the UK and three EFL textbooks from Morocco). The research shows that L2 textbooks can – and should – become key elements in classroom conversations about culture as they offer great potential for fostering learners’ reflections about the components of their cultural identities (Williams, 1983). In fact, until recent years in most countries, including Morocco, English textbooks and course materials used in language programs were not designed specifically for the learners of those countries. However, an attempt was made to use new textbooks reflecting the local customs, linguistic usages and cultural background in their context so as to suit the psyche of the local learners. The

study also shows that the home-made EFL textbooks reflect a fair distribution and frequency of the cultural elements involved in those textbooks as well as a fair amount of international, cultural and cross-cultural issues and references. One of the main conclusions then is that textbooks are one of the keys that can help the learners improve their cultural competence and realize their own identity. Textbooks and materials can lead to a high degree of meta-linguistic, meta-cognitive, and other *meta-* capabilities. That, in turns, may lead to a better development of intercultural competence and awareness of self-identity, as stated by Williams (1983): “L2 textbooks can –and should– become key participants in classroom conversations about culture as they offer great potential for fostering learners’ reflections about the components of their cultural identities” (op cit, p87). Moreover, they may help the learner and enable him or her “to develop an enriched, more complex personality and enhanced capacity for further language learning and greater openness to new cultural experiences” (CEF, p43, mentioned in Benahnia, 2012).

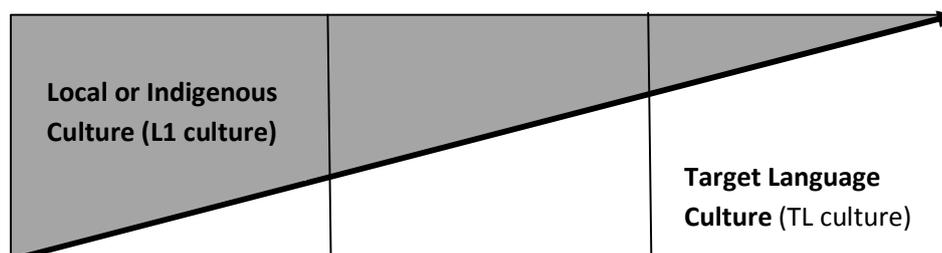
Moreover, and as it is well known, foreign language learning is based on several components, including grammatical competence, communicative competence, language proficiency, as well as a change in attitudes towards one’s own culture, or another culture (as stated by Thanasoulas (2001)). Lin (2009) argues that L2 learning is not just a matter of code switching between two languages. He also states that Pierce (1995), mentioned the idea that language is not a neutral medium of communication, but is “understood with reference to its social meaning” (cited in Lin (2009), p44). Thanasoulas (2001) also argues that in the overall, for the majority of scholars and laymen alike, cultural competence, or in other words, the knowledge of the conventions, customs, beliefs and systems of meaning of another country (or as Brooks (1975) calls it ‘BBV’ (Belief, Behavior, and Values) is, with no doubt, an integral part of foreign language learning. Therefore, many teachers have seen cultural competence as their goal, and hence were able to incorporate the teaching of culture into the foreign language curriculum in order to achieve a real intercultural proficiency based outcome. However, the argument is why many educators are more and more interested in the issue of culture teaching. The answer is very simple: **language teaching is by default culture teaching**. In other words, it is almost impossible to separate language from culture (for further details regarding this point, see Benahnia, 1992). Furthermore, the language curriculum somehow must reflect the culture of the language being taught because this process in turns helps in the process of shaping the learner’s identity as Thanasoulas, (2001) explains below:

“It seems like we are long past an era when first language acquisition and second or foreign language learning were cast in a “behavioristic mould,” being the products of imitation and language “drills,” and language was thought of as a compendium of rules and strings of words and sentences used to form propositions about a state of affairs. In the last two decades, there has been a resurgence of interest in the study of confidently conducting negotiation between mother language and TL. However, considerably few studies were undertaken to understand how learner’s mother cultural identity facilitated their pragmatic awareness.”(p44, mentioned in Benahnia 2012).

5- Prior to their departure to study abroad, to what extent should the focus be on the learners’ First Language (L1) or Second Language (L2) culture?

Scholarship students have to go through accumulative levels of learning English. Each stage should be well structured as far as the curriculum is concerned. The recycling and frequency of the cultural elements in the teaching materials is crucial. However, the amount of culture and its nature is also important to keep in mind. According to the following diagram drawn up by the author, foreign language (FL) learners at the beginning level should not be fully exposed to the target language culture. On the contrary, they should be exposed mostly to their L1 culture or Mother Tongue language culture. The reason behind that is to give them self-confidence and ability to talk to other people about their own cultural elements and issues related to their surroundings. What some governments is offering as cultural awareness program is not enough. A program which is given as a one day workshop to cover the issue of cultural awareness is not sufficient. L1 culture knowledge should start at an early age (see Benahnia, 1992). The more the learners navigate up to the next levels in their FL learning, the scope of the TL culture and its frequency must get larger; hence, giving the learner a wider chance to explore in depth the wide range of the cultural elements carried out via the TL. This hypothesis can be better illustrated by the following diagram:

Fig. 2 At which level should each type of culture be stressed more?



Preparatory
&Elementary Level

Intermediate Level

Advanced Level

(Benahnia, 1992)

3 Conclusion

To conclude this interesting and vast topic, we can advocate that knowledge about the different meanings of culture and its constituents seems vital in the foreign language teaching/learning process. However, teachers must be adequately trained on how to deal with cultural issues and how to incorporate the cultural elements from both the L1 culture as well as the TL culture, in their teaching activities. It is also important to know which culture to focus on (i.e. L1 culture, or L2/TL culture?) and how much of that culture should the learner be exposed to, and at which level?

Also, educational responsables must know that the issue of ICC is not something that can be offered in a form of a one-day workshop or seminar. It is a vast area that should be part of the EFL/ESL curriculum. Knowing about how to cope-up with people of other cultures is a long process of learning that must start at an early stage of schooling. If it comes to the worst, these scholarship candidates should at least be involved in an ICC course or program for a considerable amount of time in order to better digest it.

Another more important point is ICC (the intercultural competence) and its relationship to the process of teaching/learning a foreign language. It should also be considered as the driving force towards a better understanding of one's own culture, as well as the culture of others. Not only that, but it can also help the learners in shaping their own identity at all learning stages. Moreover, ICC should not be perceived as a tool towards changing our natural behavior in society, but rather help us shape it and gear it towards a better communication and understanding each other across cultures. Furthermore, and as stated by Antoinette Camilleri Grima, an *interculturally competent person should also have the capacity to interpret another way of life and to explain it to those who live another, as well.*

Therefore, FL teachers, should always bear in mind that the integration of ICC in EFL/ESL curricula and syllabi is a key to success in their teaching. By doing this, they will equip learners with better chances to change their perception of others, as well as their views towards their own culture and identity, as stated by Willems, 2002, p.19):*Through an education for ICC:*

- a) We open up to other ways of thinking and other methods of reasoning;
- b) we find a tongue in which we can speak our humanity to each other; and
- c) we learn to see that our own view of the world is just one among many.

Let us also not forget that ICC is NOT one single competence BUT a sophisticated combination of worldwide global competences, and the essence of intercultural competence is the love, willingness, and joy to share what you have with others, respect what they have, and adopt what might be beneficial to your own interest, social behavior, and identity without losing sight of the constituents of your own cultural boundaries and characteristics. However, as language teachers, we should not only focus on comparing, but contrasting the cultural differences between the learners' L1 culture and the L2/TL culture because by doing this, we will tend to enable the learners to make correct judgments regarding the appropriate uses and causation of language idiosyncrasies.

A final note to textbook writers seems vital. They should make sure about the nature and frequency of all possible cultural elements, without losing sight of the most significant topics that appeal to the learner. Focus should be more on content than linguistic skills alone, such as grammar and so on. In other words, textbooks content must facilitate the acquisition of cultural competence skills; i.e. when writing language textbooks for Asian learners, for example, food recipes and family relationships must be carefully selected. In the case of Arab learners, for example, it would be more appropriate to expose the learners to the difference between the laws governing a Muslim wedding, for example, and the laws governing an English wedding. Not only that, but appropriate exposure and explanation related to certain cultural behavior or characteristics, such as national drinks for each nation, ways of entertainment, negotiation, or even types of food and what they represent to a society or community, must be carefully chosen. If positively and carefully integrated and used, they can easily trigger the acquisition of

intercultural competence skills, as well as cross-cultural awareness and self-identity among EFL/ESL learners.

Further research in this regard can be done to explore the cognitive part of ICC acquisition process and its relation to identity. Also, further studies can be done in regard to the length of ICC programs and its impact on scholarship students overseas.

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