

INTEGRATING CULTURE INTO TEACHING ENGLISH TO YOUNG LANGUAGE LEARNERS

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Received: 30 August 2017; Accepted: 3 April 2018

ABSTRACT

Culture and language are two intertwined elements in education especially in language teaching. It is the interrelation between the two factors that makes integrating culture in foreign language lessons taken for granted. The inseparable combination of language acquisition and cultural awareness is found at all levels of English education from primary to secondary. This paper aims at reviewing the published literature on the importance of teaching intercultural competence (IC) to young language learners from different theories in teaching and learning a foreign language. The study will provide an overview of the necessary and natural roles of IC in language lessons for the teachers in the field.

Keywords: Language and culture, intercultural competence, intercultural education, young language learners.

TÓM TẮT

Đưa yếu tố văn hoá vào giảng dạy tiếng Anh cho trẻ em

Văn hoá và ngôn ngữ là hai phạm trù có mối quan hệ mật thiết trong giáo dục nói chung và giảng dạy ngôn ngữ nói riêng. Mối quan hệ này đôi khi làm cho sự lồng ghép văn hoá trong giảng dạy ngôn ngữ trở nên hiển nhiên. Sự kết hợp giữa việc thụ đắc ngôn ngữ và nhận thức văn hoá diễn ra ở mọi đối tượng không phân biệt trình độ ngôn ngữ hay độ tuổi. Bài viết này trình bày sơ lược tầm quan trọng của việc phát triển năng lực giao tiếp liên văn hoá cho trẻ em. Từ cái nhìn tổng thể đó, tác giả đề xuất cách thức lồng ghép văn hoá trong việc dạy tiếng Anh cho trẻ em.

Từ khoá: Văn hoá và ngôn ngữ, năng lực liên văn hoá, giáo dục liên văn hoá, tiếng Anh cho trẻ em

1. Introduction

Language teaching and learning involve many elements with communicative skill development and linguistic aspect acquisition to target for learners' linguistic competence. However, cultural competence has been treated as a new objective of foreign language teaching. In fact, the aims of English language teaching in Vietnam are to utilize the four macro skills listening, speaking, reading and writing, to master basic knowledge on grammar, phonetics and vocabulary, and to reach a level of knowledge of Vietnamese culture, English and American cultures, and become aware of crosscultural differences (MOET, 2007). In the wave of dynamic integration in ASEAN and in the world, intercultural competence and intercultural education have

gained more acknowledgement, but how cultural elements are to be treated and manifested in language education, especially when teaching young language learners (YLL) is a veiled issue. In fact, the integration of culture in foreign language teaching (FLT) depends on many parameters: views of culture: static or dynamic; angles of language and culture in relationship: dependent, independent, or interdependent; the gaps between home culture and target culture: oriental and occidental; the nature of language learners: children or adults; the roles of culture in the eyes of different language teaching methods and approaches; and the learners' stage of language proficiency: complete beginners, elementary to advanced. This paper is a survey of the integration of culture into teaching English

as a foreign language (EFL) to young language learners (YLL), referring to children between the ages of seven and twelve, or primary school students, and an offering of some recommendations for the practice of culture teaching and learning from the view of intercultural language teaching and learning.

2. Language and culture

Culture and its aspects

The definition of culture depends on how it is viewed. To Hofstede (1984), "Culture is the collective programming of the mind which distinguishes the members of one category of people from another" (p. 51). Ovando and Collier (1985) pointed out that culture consists of two components: the 3Fs (facts, faces, and fiestas), and high civilization. To Brooks (1997), culture is simply defined as the literature or civilization of a country.

Brooks (1997) further classified culture into "big C" culture and "small c" culture. "Big C" culture is formal, more overt and visible, representing a set of facts and statistics on the arts, history, geography, business, festivals, customs, institutions, literature, art, history, music, science, economic, sports and other achievements of its people while "small c" culture is informal, more invisible, referring to culture associated with a region or a group of people, language-like communication styles, verbal and non-verbal language symbols, cultural norms, conducts. This classification is claimed for ignoring the dynamic feature of cultures.

Another noted classification of culture is shallow culture and deep culture (Hall, 1976; Hanley, 1999). Shallow culture relates to unspoken rules like courtesy, concept of time, facial expressions, and nature of friendship. Deep culture is about the unconscious rules, different attitudes toward dependence, individualism, concept of past and future. The hidden part is much more impressive and dynamic than the overt part of culture.

Liddicoat, et al., (2003) view culture in relation to the process of socialisation and language as a means of culture transmission. It is the social exchange and interaction between people that

build and transmit culture. This dynamic view of culture and culture as related to language help to form an approach to intercultural language teaching and learning.

Language and culture relationship

The relationship between language and culture is viewed differently. In the hypothesis of linguistic determinism (Sapir, 1929), language determines thought and culture. The structure of a language can strongly influence or determine someone's world view. However, this hypothesis has been criticized because the relation between culture and language is considered more causal than correlational. Hymes believes that "speech is so fundamental an activity of man, language so integral a part of his culture" (1964: p. 21) because speech does not occur in a vacuum, but rather in specific context. To Kramsch (1998), language and culture are interrelated because language expresses and embodies cultural reality. Liddicoat (2002, p. 5) states "culture shapes what we say, when we say it, and how we say it from the simplest language we use to the most complex. It is fundamental to the way we speak, write, listen and read". This variety of perspectives of language and culture serve to prove the interrelation between language and culture: culture defines language and language reflects culture. This intertwined relation calls for a meaningful inclusion of culture in language teaching.

3. Integrating culture into language education

However, there are also more numerous views supporting culture instruction in the language classroom (Bennett, et al., 2003; Kramsch, 1993). They agree that culture should be included in teaching language especially in the context of teaching EFL because the speakers of target language are learning outside of the social contexts of the target language. If we ignore teaching culture in language lessons, the students will be at risk of becoming a "fluent fool" (Bennett, et al., 2003, p. 237). Sharing the same view, Witherspoon (1980) recommends that languages should not be studied apart from their cultures. To Kramsch (1993), culture should be the core of language teaching and cultural awareness and

language proficiency share a reciprocal relationship. Brown (1994) believes that there are some obvious connections between culture and language, so language teachers cannot avoid conveying impressions of another culture into their teaching.

Communicative competence (CC) and intercultural Competence (IC) are sometimes defined as overlapping. To Hymes (1966), CC is comprised of four competences: linguistic, sociolinguistic, discourse, and strategic competence. Of those, sociolinguistic competence is the ability to decide how and what to say in different cultural contexts, which makes sociolinguistic competence overlapped with IC. From another view of sociolinguistics, CC models are included with intercultural elements and involved with learners' attitudes, awareness and behaviors and they affect the learners' language and culture acquisition (Liddicoat, et al., 2003). To Meyer (2000), sociocultural models of linguistic competence include linguistic system and other communicative process and effective factors. It can be inferred that intercultural competence is the combination of social and communicative skills or communicative competence (cited in Liddicoat et al, 2003). Like the relationship between language and culture, linguistic competence and intercultural competence are interrelated and overlapped, and the enhancement of one will positively affect the other. Likewise, Abolghasem (2010) agrees that cultural awareness and second language proficiency can be enhanced through culture teaching in foreign language classes.

4. Introducing culture into teaching EFL to YLL: why and how

The roles of culture in language education has been gaining its rightful position. EFL teachers generally have positive perceptions towards culture teaching but whether and how culture is introduced into teaching YLL has not yet been soundly researched in the literature.

Pros and cons of introducing culture into teaching YLL

The notion of teaching or integrating culture into the teaching of a language might trig-

ger some negative reactions. Integrating culture to language teaching in general is still a vague idea because language is a part of culture. While language is taught, cultural aspects of the target language is naturally transmitted. For example, if the children are able to greet, thank and react to compliments appropriately in target language, they can perform linguistic and cultural functions successfully. That means, culture is carved in the language use, and cultural or intercultural competence is naturally developed along with linguistic competence. Another opposition is that integrating culture is complicated and the curriculum is overcrowded so it can bring negative impacts to YLL's early language acquisition. Teaching a foreign language away from its environment is not easy and including culture into language teaching brings a burden to this process. Besides, to YLL, acquiring a language is more effective than learning a language. That is why culture should be acquired in an implicit process. Finally, IC should be later introduced when the students have reached certain level of language proficiency and have developed their own cultural identity.

However, according to Tomalin and Stempleski (1996, p. 11), teaching culture helps to increase intercultural awareness and to promote cross-cultural interaction by awareness, appreciation and acceptance of their own culture and other cultures. The case is also true for YLL education because children can develop their critical interculturality, somewhere between native culture and target culture, which can be different from both cultures. That is why children also have problems with culture in intercultural communication. It is shown by the fact the YLL's use of native and target language mutually affect each other in terms of culture, from saying hello, making acquaintance, giving and reacting to compliments. This is shown in the following conversations in YLL's native language (Table 1):

Table 1. YLL's interlanguage in speaking Vietnamese

YLL's Interlanguage	English translation	Native Vietnamese	English equivalents
Chào mẹ!	- Hi, mom!	- Thưa mẹ!	- Dear mom!
Chào ông. Ông tên gì? Con tên An.	- Hello uncle. What is your name? I am An.	- Thưa ông. Con tên là An.	- Good morning. My name is An.
Bé xinh gái quá!	- You look very pretty!	- Bé xinh gái quá!	- You look very pretty!
Đạ, con cảm ơn cô.	- Thank you.	- Đạ, đâu có đâu!	- I don't think so!
		Or - (Silence and embarrassment)	

The YLL's language in the above situations prove the affect of L2 in YLL's use of L1. In the first example, the power gap between mother and children, the old and the young seems narrower. In Vietnamese, children had better use "Thưa mẹ!" than "Chào mẹ!" while in English the conversation seems more friendly and approachable. In the second conversation, the situation is not popular in Vietnamese because saying or asking the superior's names are not recommended and even forbidden; also, it is not necessary for the child to introduce her name because people do not often address each other by names but rather the relationship between them. The third conversation shows that the YLL can transfer English use to carry out a linguistic function in Vietnamese. The kids are used to reacting to compliments.

However, learning a language without culture can be at risk especially when YLL are not aware of linguistic functions for certain communicative purposes. Through my observation, the YLL can fail to practise to interact with the foreigners due to the lack of awareness and appropriateness. The children are willing to speak English even to complete strange foreigners for unclear communicative purpose, just to "utter out" what they have learnt like "What colour is it?", "What is the weather like?", "How old are you?". The both cases prove that IC can develop early during childhood and the lack of IC puts conversation at risk. That is a good reason for introducing

culture into teaching YLL.

Strategies for introducing culture into teaching YLL

Intercultural awareness could be introduced at any level foreign language education. In teaching YLL, cultural aspects should be introduced simply and naturally. To make the cultural contents simple, the teachers should classify and refine the cultural knowledge. The five types of culture aspects included in language lessons are biological growth, personal refinement, literature and the fine arts, patterns of living and the sum total of a way of life (Omaggio, 1986, p. 364). Of these, patterns of living like eating, going out, playing around, and schooling are the most popular in YLL's language instruction. For YLL's education, culture can be introduced to language teaching in variety of forms: films, television, fairy stories, songs, games, which can be found on the internet with little effort. By using the audio and visual arts of their age, the YLL will acquire the language and culture while enjoying the arts. Therefore, language and culture can be transmitted naturally and effectively without causing any burden to the YLL.

Wahyanti and Warsono (2015) suggest numerous strategies to develop cultural understanding for YLL. They set an importance of the learning of culture through meaningful experiences with cultural phenomena which can be created in the classroom. First, teachers can put pictures containing cultural phenomena on

the wall to create the atmosphere of the target culture. Second, YLL should have an access to story books about the target and native cultures in English to help YLL to perceive the variety in cultural practices. Third, songs and chants can be introduced to help YLL understand cultural expressions through fun activities. Fourth, reciting rhymes or doing finger plays can reinforce young learners' understanding of vocabulary and specific topics. Fifth, YLL can benefit from colouring pictures describing activities in the target culture. In sum, teachers can organize variety of activities to introduce culture in teaching YLL.

To enhance the effectiveness in the developing of IC to YLL, some suggestions should be considered:

Culture acquisition is a priority; cultural learning is necessary: learning language is like learning culture, it is most effective when the learners acquire it, learning unconsciously. To make the language and acquisition more likely to happen, the teachers should collect many audio and visual arts and introduce them to the YLL. The materials should contain language at the students' level and match the students' interests, and psychological stages of development. However, when the sociocultural issues happen in language lessons that may cause misunderstanding or embarrassment, the teachers should address them briefly and meaningfully to make culture learning more interesting, without creating overwhelms of doubled concerns: language awareness and culture awareness.

Make use of arts and technology: in the time of technology motivation, internet access, smart phones, tablets are equipped in nearly every household. Many English cartoons, TV channels, video clips, songs, rhymes, fairy tales, and computer games that are specially designed for children are available and accessible. The children will have the chance of seeing and hearing how the children around the world use English in different situations. Those kinds of lessons will provide YLL with not only natural conversational English, but also cultural knowledge about living patterns of different cultures and opportunity to form critical thinking about the similarities

and differences among communities.

Be careful with choral repetition: while chanting and songs encouraged in teaching language and culture, choral repetitions, although a very popular activity in EFL class for YLL, they should not be overused. The meaningless choral focusing on phonetic forms will take language practice out of its linguistic and cultural contexts. Therefore, the overuse of repetition will negatively affects YLL's performance in real contexts. As a result, YLL will be not sensitive to real communication as they would rather "blurt out" what they have learnt than interact or communicate when they meet foreigners.

Create intercultural and foreign language environment: teachers can create an environment rich in the target culture and language by decorating their classrooms with posters, paintings, notice boards, and posters. Besides, the teachers can make use of natural classroom English instead of the language of instruction to create good English and a cultural environment. For example, teachers should use more English in some situations, like saying "Sorry" after sneezing, and saying "God bless you" when someone is sneezing.

Accept intercultural development: interculturality is a natural part of intercultural competence development. Teachers can establish the sphere of interculturality by providing the diversity and encouraging tolerance, acceptance and build positive awareness towards the new and different culture. As a model to shape YLL's thought, teachers should avoid voicing criticisms of differences, and encourage YLLs to think differently. For example, teachers should give much appreciation to YLL who can draw a picture of people from different races rather than people of the same race.

Make the parents engaged: outside the school schedule, children stay with their family most of the time. Parents, although not necessarily fluent English users, can yet support a YLL's culture and language learning. Good parents can help their children to choose and access good websites with many interesting and suitable materials, or even they can enjoy the songs, cartoons

in English with their children. However, in some cases, parents who are expert in their native language and culture cannot accept YLL's interculturality and they negatively react towards the "weird" use of new language. When the children keep saying "Thank you", "Please", "Sorry" with their family members, they may be considered excessive, snobbish, overly proud, or unnatural. The negative reaction in this situation may hinder YLL's progress. The situations call for the orientation to YLL parents about the terculture and interlanguage developments.

5. Conclusion

Introducing culture into teaching EFL to YLL in Vietnam is essential and feasible. This belief can be spread and confirmed but teaching English to YLL still face many problems like inadequate teaching staffs' language proficiency and pedagogical quality (Nguyen, 2015). If culture is early introduced in foreign language education, the YLL can improve intercultural understanding which fosters language competence. Besides, culture teaching can help YLL aware of how to say and what to say appropriately to different communicative purposes. Cultural aspects in teaching YLL should be introduced and naturally presented alongside with language lessons by watching a cartoon, reading a comic, listening to a song, going on a rhythmic chants rather than be taught explicitly. In sum, if culture gets more focus in language teaching and learning, YLL can be more confident and successful in intercultural communication in future.

Conflicts of Interest:

The authors declare no conflict of interest

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