

Integrating Culture in Language Teaching

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Abstract

For years, scholars have searched remedies to the inadequate treatment of the role of Culture in Foreign Language Education. On one hand, course book and syllabus designers treated language and culture tasks separately. Some go as far as to place culture at the “core of language instruction”, whereby the ultimate goal is cultural awareness and intercultural communication competence (Tran-Hoang, 2010). On the other hand, ESL research argues that focusing primarily on culture in language classrooms runs the risk of undermining the last 40 years of SLA research. The 2017 National Curriculum Revisions in Japan labelled Communication Competence as one essential life skill. Curriculum is challenged and “interaction” has become the key element in language and communication (Kubota, 2019). Although recent trends show that scholars and educators have come to embrace the natural interdependence of language and culture (Ennis, 2015), culture teaching has left much to be desired. An extensive review of literature reveals related problems include instructors’ negative attitudes, ineffective instruction and absence of academic support for teaching culture. This presentation suggests an interdisciplinary approach to the teaching of Communications that help create a powerful learning experience emphasizing integrative learning and heightened student engagement. The goal is to show that by carefully selecting culture content and tasks, and maximizing student engagement through classroom interaction, culture learning can be fully integrated into communication classes. This careful integration exemplifies the case “inside a white box there are two black boxes wanting to come out.”

Keywords: Culture Awareness, Language Acquisition, Integrated Instruction

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Introduction

The first part of this paper discusses research findings and issues related to the general theme of this research. The second part highlights issues that hope to provide the foundation and existence for a pedagogical integration of cultural elements into the teaching of English as a second or foreign Language.

Review of the Situation

To start with, what role should Culture play in the ES • EFL Curriculum? How should it be defined? How should it be taught? These and other questions have been raised time and again over the years, yet no real consensus has emerged and certainly no simple answers” (Furstenberg, 2010). For decades, scholars have searched remedies to the inadequate treatment of the role of culture in Language Education. Course books and syllabus designers have treated language and culture tasks separately. However, the truth of the matter is the intrinsic relation between these two is what Douglas Brown describes:

A language is a part of a culture, and a culture is part of a language;
the two are intricately interwoven so that one cannot separate one from
the other...without losing the significance of either language or culture.
(2011)

Here are a few examples of the continuing dilemma and attempts to resolve the issue. The publication of “*Theory and Practice in Language Learning*” in 1960 triggered the interest on the field of teaching culture in second of foreign language education, and started a discussion on the topic.

Four decades later, *Standards for FL Learning* (1996) listed culture as one of the five goals of learning a foreign language. Since then, language educators and scholars have generally recognized the importance of culture education, and the teaching of culture has become an indispensable part of teaching language. Some go as far as to place culture at the “core” of language instruction, whereby the ultimate goal is cultural awareness and intercultural communication competence (Tran-Hoang, 2010).

The importance of culture and culture perspective was never more obvious than when ACTFL defined the national standards in 2006 with the 5C’s: Communication, Cultures, Connections, Comparisons and Communities in learning a foreign language. Culture was included with its closely interrelated components: the tangible and intangible elements of a society.

Students demonstrate an understanding of the relationship between
the practices and perspectives of the culture studied.

Researchers and scholars (Schulz, 2007) have argued that the objectives for learning culture should move beyond simple “culture as fact” and should aim at gaining different cultural perspectives such as worldviews, values and beliefs.

Despite these efforts however, the inclusion of culture in language instruction remained an unresolved issue. Foreign and second language teachers have been confronted with many problems in teaching culture. Lange and Paige indicated that “In most language courses there is a focus on language skills, but cultures are overlooked. Yang and Chen (2014) refers to some of these as:

1. Instructors' negative attitude toward the teaching of culture.
2. The lack of effective instruction, resources and technology.
3. The absence of academic support for teaching culture.

Language skills have become the focus of language instruction; culture has been overlooked. Thus, although recent trends showed that scholars and educators have come to embrace the natural interdependence of language and culture, culture teaching has left much to be desired. The upshot of these several complex problems is the inherent interconnectedness of language, culture and communication.

Discussion

This paper suggests an alignment of two strands in the use and development of content and materials for the teaching of both. It proposes defining the levels of culture based on Ennis' Integrated Approach (2015) and aligning them with the different stages of second language acquisition for an integrated classroom instruction. In the next section, culture and its components are first discussed, followed by a review of the stages of second language acquisition, along with how to carefully blend aspects of both to achieve integration.

To start with, I reconsider Edward Hall's Cultural Iceberg Model representing his iceberg analogy of culture. "If the culture of a society was the iceberg, Hall reasoned, then there are some aspects visible, above the water, but there is a larger portion hidden beneath the surface (1976)."

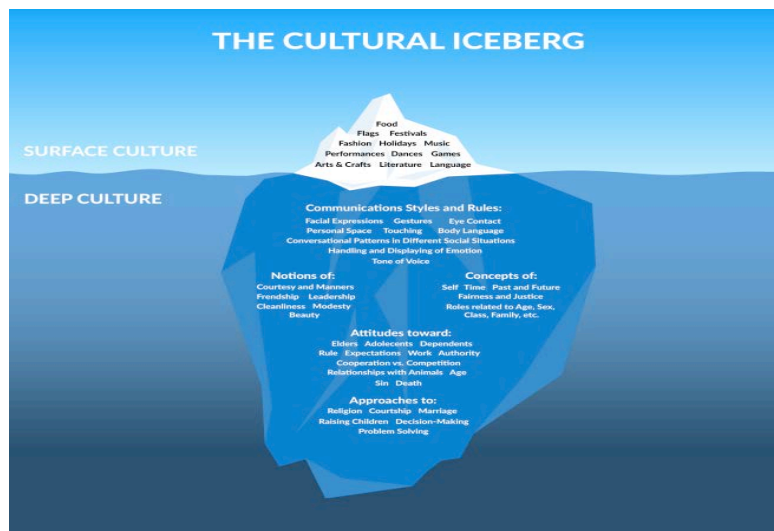


Figure 1: The Culture Iceberg Metaphor

The external, or conscious, part of culture is what we can see and is the tip of the iceberg and includes behaviors and some beliefs. The internal, or subconscious, part of culture is below the surface of a society and includes some beliefs and the values and thought patterns that underlie behavior.

Hall's categorization of the external, or the conscious part of culture which is visible on the iceberg, and the internal, or the subconscious part of culture which is below the surface level was subsequently modified in Schein's representation below.

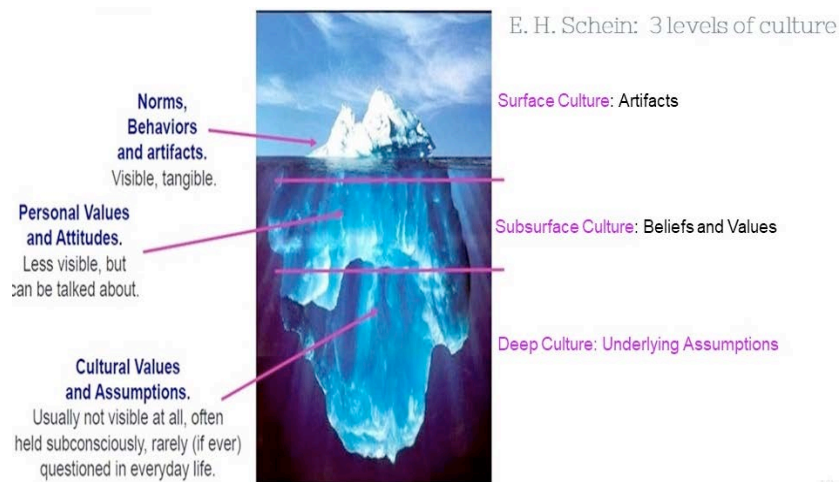


Figure 2: The three levels of culture

Schein defines the three levels of culture as Artifacts, Beliefs and Values, and Basic Underlying Assumptions. These three divisions align well with the different levels of culture iceberg.

Another way of viewing culture which implies concepts of surface and deep culture is the 3P's, which has been expressed in the image of a triangle. Cutshall labels Products as the items required by underlying beliefs and values of a culture, such as food; Practices as the patterns of social interaction or behavior accepted by society, such as rituals and social discourse, and Perspectives as "that culture's view of the world" including the people's attitudes and values. Each division is dependent upon the other, and can pose potential trouble for those studying a foreign language.

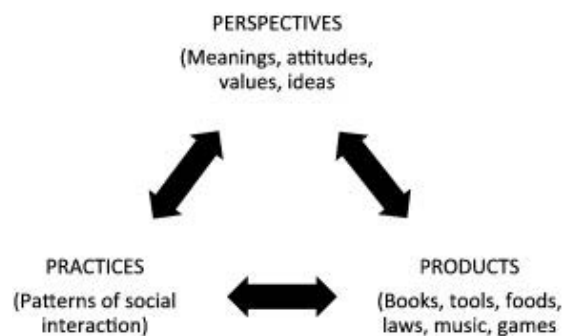


Figure 3: The 3P's: Products, Practices and Perspectives

Culture understanding and the journey to language learning

The concepts discussed above can be helpful in determining the content of culture instruction and the methodological planning of what to teach when depending on student readiness. The problem is, culture does not simply take on one form. It covers all the tangible symbols and observable behaviors down to the deeper meaning of these symbols including beliefs and values. Which aspects comes in the early stages of language learning? The surface level is easy enough to teach: national costumes, dances, national dishes, festivals, sightseeing spots and so on. These come in colorful illustrations in ELT textbooks and videos. How can the deeper surface of culture translate into language instruction?

Another vital question is the timing involved. One suggestion has been that it should be put off until the students had a firmer grasp of the fundamentals of language they are learning. It is in the latter stages of fluency and mastery, where the deep aspects of culture can become a rich source of culture learning in the classroom. This paper argues in favor of the opposing point of view; that since culture is a gateway to language, holding off cultural topics is a mistake. Effective integration of culture learning depends on the careful sequencing of its content and the skillful infusion in the language instruction. This is the focus of the next section.

Teaching culture elements in the different stages of ESL acquisition

This research suggests that successful integration of culture and language calls for conscious awareness of the surface and deep elements, as described in the Culture Iceberg metaphor, alongside the stages of language acquisition. Let us first review what students can do in the different stages of ESL acquisition.

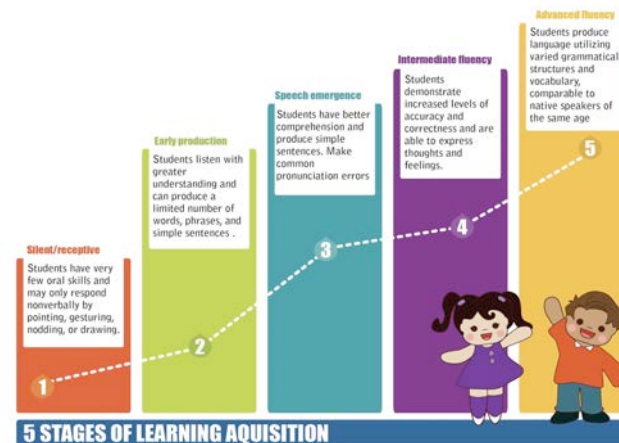


Figure 4: The Stages of ESL Acquisition

Although instructors cannot expect culture appreciation, nor culture discussion, in the silent-receptive stage, the early stages of language learning, cultural components can be used to introduce new vocabulary and grammar points, or to explain certain language formations. At this stage, reading passages in the target language should introduce students to the surface elements of the culture of the target language.

By the time students get to the stage of speech emergence and production, they are ready for basic communication by combining words into phrases and short sentences. Language instruction can gradually introduce the visible patterns of cultural behavior as part of language practice. Students can probably start imitating and applying language rules of the target language.

In the latter stages of fluency and mastery, the deep aspects of culture can become a rich source of culture learning. When students are able to communicate in complex structures in the target language, they can discuss reasons for differences in cultural behavior. Learning different non-verbal communication behavior is an important communication topic. Students can compare why “avoiding eye contact” is accepted in Japan, and not in the US. Culture instruction can now go deeper into the subsurface culture and students compare social patterns of behavior. They are now able to understand why interrupting a teacher in the midst of a lecture is hardly acceptable in Asia, while silence is abhorred in most Western societies.

Similarly, silence of Japanese students is commonly interpreted as indifference, and incomprehensible to teachers of other culture background.

When students have developed second language competency, teaching and learning cultures can be both interesting and challenging. When students have gained mastery of the target or second language, teachers can expect awareness, appreciation and dialogues focusing on the perspective element of the 3P's. Textbooks and lectures are not merely to supplement the language component but also to complement it; language learning is incomplete without culture learning.

Conclusions

This paper has discussed ways toward an effective careful integration of culture and its elements into the language classroom by aligning the two strands of culture iceberg and stages of second language acquisition, emphasizing integrative learning and heightened student engagement. A careful integration “carefully selecting culture content and tasks according to Stages of ESL Acquisition” exemplifies the case Ennis (2015) identifies: “Inside a white box there are two Black boxes wanting to come out.”

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