

Investigating Kurdish Students Need to Learn English Language Culture in Their EFL Classes

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ABSTRACT

This paper aims at investigating whether teaching the target language culture in the target language classrooms are useful or not. As for Kurdish learners of English language, it is essential to learn culture within the target language learning classrooms. The interview results showed that Kurdish people are confronted by a general cultural barrier and difficulties ongoing to a foreign country whether for living, work or study. Furthermore, Kurdish learners need to learn the Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC) in their classrooms to acquire skills and knowledge for intercultural communications. As well as to accept the cultural differences to prevent them from cultural shock and cope with the new environment easily. Moreover, the cultural aspects that the interviewees learnt before in their classrooms were not useful at all because they were general stereotypes which did not match the real-life culture. Finally, all the interviewees agreed that teaching communicative and real lifestyle culture is needed in the English language classrooms in Kurdistan.

KEYWORDS. *Culture and language learning, Kurdish classroom, English language teaching, ICC, Kurdistan*

1. INTRODUCTION

Since language and culture are inseparable in the learning process, teaching the target language culture is very important in teaching any language. Unfortunately, most language learners are often unfamiliar with the cultural elements of the learned language, in a way that makes them be quite unprepared to understand the language and its culture appropriately.

The reason behind this study is the fact that when the researcher first went to study in UK, she was unprepared to be socially integrated with English people and she felt that she is often at a loss to know what to do or to say in many different circumstances. The researcher realised that communicating with people is not just speaking with them, but also understanding their values, attitudes, habits and beliefs. She found that there are many lifestyle aspects which she did not know before and realised that they are important in communicating and living in the target language society. The researcher came to the conclusion that there are many vital cultural features that English language learners need to learn about the target language. Unfortunately, the importance of teaching English with its culture has not been recognised in the Kurdish English language classrooms, yet.

1.1 Aim of the Study

The aim of this study is to find out whether teaching culture is necessary and needed in language classrooms in Kurdistan or not. The following three main questions were put forward:

1. Why is culture taught in the EFL classroom?
2. What cultural aspects should/ can be taught in the classroom?
3. How should culture be taught?

to be answered in the upcoming section. After that, the teaching of English in the Kurdish cultural context is presented. Then, the interviews with a sample of Kurdish speakers in UK to be shown and the findings to be discussed.

2. THERORITICAL BACKGROUND

This part focuses on three main questions which are:

1. Why is culture taught in the EFL classroom?
2. What cultural aspects should/ can be taught in the classroom?
3. How should Culture to Be Taught?

Each question will be supported by related theories and researchers' views. To begin with, some definitions about culture and its relation with language to be mentioned.

Over the past few decades, a lot of attention has been paid to the importance of culture in teaching and the relationship between learning a language and its culture has been defined. Taylor (1972) defines culture as a combination of knowledge, art, morals, beliefs, customs, and many other habits gained by any member of a community. Similarly, Hofstede (1997:5) defines culture as "the collective programming of the mind which distinguishes the members of the one group or category of people from another". Moreover, Lusting and Koester (2003) connects culture with communication as the aim of language teaching is helping learners communicate with other learners from various countries. Depending on the above definitions, it can be noted that they define culture as a range of interpretations about values, beliefs and norms that should be learned as they relatively affect a large number of people.

2.1 Why is Culture Taught in the EFL Classroom?

People behave according to their culture. Tomalin (1993) maintain that there are some linguistic and socio-economic factors which inspire the importance of teaching and learning the target language culture. One of the factors of learning the English culture is the increase in the economic importance and learners' travel to English speaking countries to learn English. This has led to reassessment of the teaching and education content to meet learners' needs in order to discover and explain the differences between cultures in more detail (Tomalin, 1993). By saying this, people from different cultural backgrounds such as Taiwan and Iraq have various and different traditions which are completely different from English speaking countries' traditions. Therefore, in order to avoid a culture shock, those learners need to know some details about the culture that they are going to live or study at to help them adapt and understand the new environment and culture.

Moreover, according to Byram & Zerata (1997) culture should be taught in the language classrooms in order to help the learners use the target language correctly and efficiently. Hong (2008) also agrees that teaching cultural variations along with the structure of the target language helps learners to avoid misunderstanding due to the cultural references. According to the cognitive definition of Byram & Zerata (1997), culture can be considered as the logic by which people can analyse, organise and understand the world. Furthermore, Byram, Gribkova, and Starkey (2007) believe that it is essential and important to explain to learners the differences between their own culture and the culture of the target language. Also it helps them accept the habits and the behaviours of the target language culture so that they can acquire the language easily (Byram, Gribkova,, and Starkey, 2007). Byram

(1989) considers that learners cannot use and understand the target language properly without recognising its culture. To sum up, it can be deduced that all the mentioned researchers believe that teaching the English culture in English language classes is important and essential because of the diversity in the cultural features that might affect communication between people from different cultures and due to the fact that language and culture are part and parcel.

2.2 What Cultural Aspects Should/ Can Be Taught in the EFL Classroom?

Kramsch (1993) believes that language use is considered a social performance, then culture should become one of the aims of language teaching. In the language teaching context and the relationship between language and culture, Byram and Risager (1999) indicate that language teaching should develop both cultural and linguistic competence, namely Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC). Moreover, Byram, Gribkova, and Starkey (2007) highly recommend teaching Intercultural Communicative Competence ICC in classes rather than teaching culture itself. They indicate that ICC refers to acquiring skills, knowledge, and critical cultural awareness which are important for intercultural communication. They, also, insist on teaching ICC instead of teaching culture because they think that it is essential to teach the learners how to accept the cultural differences instead of showing them the target culture only (Byram, Gribkova, and Starkey, 2007)

Teaching culture in the classroom raise a debate about what are the right cultural aspects that need to be taught with the target language. Seliger (1988: 30 cited in Byram, 1994: 5) stated "Since language is used in social exchanges, the feelings, attitudes and motivations of learners in relation to the target language itself, to the speakers of the language, and to the culture will affect how learners respond to the input to which they are exposed. In other words, these affective variables will determine the rate and degree of second language learning.

ICC focused mainly on intercultural aspects, which are politically, religiously, and socially influenced (Lwayna-Luma, 2020). This may delay the process of communicative language teaching (CLT); nevertheless, Byram (1997) defined four dimensions of sociocultural competence including five components: attitudes, knowledge, two types of skills and awareness that language educators need to consider them while teaching the target language (Lwayna-Luma, 2020). Also, he modified them into teaching objectives, such as:

- Attitudes of values/beliefs; curiosity and openness; relativizing others;
- Knowledge of self, and others in communication; of other cultures, processes of interaction-individual and societal skills for interpreting and relating;
- Skills for discovering and interacting;
- Awareness: critical cultural awareness
- (Byram1997 cited by Newton and Shearn 2015: 23).

Moreover, Byram (1994) emphasizes the importance of taking the learner's needs in learning the target culture into consideration when teaching language with culture as it is important to select the right cultural aspects of the target language culture which learners want to learn about besides learning that language. Moreover, according to Tomalin (1993), it is important to consider the different culture behaviours and the differences between them. For instance, the British culture is not the same as the American culture even though they both speak the same language. Also, Humphrey (2007) believes that cultural variations stem from the social, regional and national organisations. Thus, teaching culture along with language will involve teaching the above aspects as well. Succinctly speaking, it can be conducted that ICC is better to be taught in English language classrooms with serious consideration of what learners want to learn.

2.3 How Should Culture Be Taught in EFL Classes?

According to Kramersch (1993), various approaches have been handled in teaching English language. These approaches can be divided into two categories. The first category is the mono-cultural approach which separates teaching English language from its culture as it concentrates on culture only (Kramersch, 1993).

Here teaching culture was not seen or considered to be a part of the language. Nowadays, this approach is viewed as insufficient and defective because it does not accomplish learner's understanding of the target language culture. For example, the Soviet era offered cultural courses for their English language learners such as geography and history of Great British as the language and culture are inseparable (Kramersch, 1993). All these courses have experienced the same limitations because they often offer the factual knowledge and prescribe the functions and structure of organisations. They, also, generalise and stereotyped people's lives (Mountford & Wadham-Smith, 2000).

The second category is the comparative approach which teaches the language and its culture represented by ICC with focus on comparing the learner's own culture and the other culture (the comparative approach). This approach indicates that the target culture needs to be related and compared to the learner's own culture (Buttjes and Byram, 1990). It is further based on the learners' own beliefs and values about their culture and this shows successful communication between learners from different cultures. Byram, Morgan, and Colleagues (1994) state that learners cannot simply rid themselves from their own culture and step into another culture as to deny one's culture is to deny one's being. Although this does not mean that learners should evaluate which culture is better, they need to learn that there are different ways to do something and their own way is not the only possible way. Therefore, since ICC is better to be taught in English classes, teachers should use the comparative approach for teaching culture and language.

3. THE TEACHING OF ENGLISH LANGUAGE IN THE KURDISH CULTURAL CONTEXT

Learners should be always taken into consideration when constructing any curriculum. However, regarding Kurdish culture and Kurdish people, there is a scarcely any literature about them and since Kurdish culture is similar to Arabic culture, same references will apply to both target language classrooms. According to Al Gamdi (2003), Kurdish culture could be considered similar to Arabic culture and people should realise that cultural backgrounds play an important role in finding out the people's behaviours, attitudes and perspectives towards their own culture and the other cultures. Kurdish society is basically governed by norms and traditions that highly consider the importance of respecting tradition and habits (Al Gamdi, 2003)). Thus, Kurdish people do not have a broad range of experience and knowledge about other cultures. They are considered to be persuasive and hold to their own culture because they think that any unfamiliar habits might affect their society negatively (Al Hussain, 2000). These features and principles affect the whole aspect of the Kurdish lives such as food, marriage, family and education.

As our focus on education, it is important to describe the education context of Kurdistan. The dominant teaching approach in the Kurdish classrooms is the teacher-centered approach (Al Sagher, 2010). However, this does not mean that the learners have no participation in the classroom at all, but limited.

Regarding English language teaching in Kurdistan, although Kurdish teachers tend to teach English culture using the comparative approach, only general aspects of the target culture are taught such as weather, clothing and food. That is due to the lack of ICC in the textbooks (see appendix 1) which shows limited exposure of cultural aspects not as much as learners need to know to have a better understanding of the target culture and be able to refer to it whenever he/she has the opportunity to live in the target language country. The English culture is based on stereotypes which are useless. Foreign language learners "may not spend the time or may not have opportunities to learn about variation within cultures being perceived to be different from theirs. Rather, they use superficially noticeable events to make judgment about the characteristics of an entire social group and to

determine otherness" (Smith & Mackie, 2000:23). Therefore, if we only use language without the exact culture of the target language, people might build their knowledge on stereotypes and they might perform language according to their own culture. Byram & Buttjes (1990) believe that if we teach language separated from its culture, then learners are not learning the target language properly but they are learning aversion of their own.

4. DATACOLLECTION, INTERVIEWS AND KEY FINDINGS

4.1 Data Collection

Five Kurdish people in UK were interviewed. The reason of the interviews was to see how people find the new culture that they are living in and was the English culture that they have been taught in English language classrooms in Kurdistan useful in communicating and interacting with native speakers when they arrived to UK or not. Also, Four questions were designed to achieve the purpose of the study which is whether teaching culture is necessary and needed in language classrooms in Kurdistan or not. The interviews were carried out according to the Nottingham University ethic procedures where the research has been conducted and before preceding the interview, an explanation was provided about the aim of the interview and the research project in order to make the interviewees aware of the use of what they are going to say. Each interview lasted fifteen to twenty minutes. The interviews were carried via the internet, Yahoo messenger. The five participants were of both genders. There were three learners, a female married immigrant and one male who came to the UK for a job opportunity. Their actual names were not declared, but instead their first initials were used.

These different participants were chosen because each one has different intentions for living in the UK. So different opinions and attitudes towards the new culture were expected to be found out. All of them have received their English language education in Kurdistan; however, the first time they practiced speaking English language was when they first arrived in UK.

Moreover, the age of the participants range from twenty to forty years old. This is because they are adult and have their own beliefs, predictions and perceptions about life. In other words, they understand the differences between their Kurdish culture and the UK (English language) culture and they have collected through the time their own views about unfamiliar aspects of culture (khadir, 2021). The interviewees' names have been changed to letters according to the ethic procedures to protect their identities. The next subsection deals with the interviews and the key findings.

4.2 Interviews and Key Findings

Kurdish people have learned general and basic view about life in Britain (khadir, 2021). Most of the interviewees said that they have not been taught the English culture when they were at school in their home country because the textbooks assumed to be concentrating on the English language linguistically only. Even if there were a cultural activity, they did not focus much on it and when they came to UK they did not find the information that they have been taught useful culturally. However, the researcher assumes that the Kurdish views, opinions and attitudes towards English cultures changed once they were exposed to the new culture.

D.A is one of the interviewees and he is 26 years old studying MSc in Mathematics and has been in UK for a year and a half. He said that when he was in Kurdistan he had little information about the English culture based on stereotypes such as they *"apologies a lot, they queue for everything, cannot know if they are talking seriously or sarcastically"*. When he came here, he had to change his attitudes and opinions, he had formed previously about culture as they were only stereotypes. However, accepting and acquiring new behaviours, attitudes and opinions from a new culture were still difficult for him to cope with as there were many aspects of the new culture that would interrupt and come cross his principles (religious, traditions, customs and beliefs). For instance, he was not taught that English people drink alcohol or eat pork. He said about Christmas day:

"I know it is a happy day for people here and it is nice to be with them and share their happiness, but I only can share the joy with them without being obliged to do some things which are not acceptable in my culture and religion."

D.K is a 24 years old girl student studying MA in Law and she has been in the UK for almost two years. She said that she always like to take *"the good side (helpful, friendly, supportive, respectful) of the culture and neglect the bad side (Talkative, bad manners, rude)"*. She does not base her behaviour on stereotypes. She prefers to discover the new culture by herself.

A.P is 28 years old student studying PhD in Political Sciences. He has been here for 3 years. He said that there were no activities or exercises in the English language lessons that could show how to act in a situation on the English speaking culture and it was *"English language in Kurdish culture"*. The teachers merely concentrated on explicit grammar and vocabulary. Learning English in Kurdistan was not useful for him because he was not informed or taught how to behave and act with native speakers of English.

S.H. is a 30 year old married woman who has been in the UK for more than 9 years. Asking about the cultural part that she had been taught in Kurdistan, she replied: *"There was not even an idea about the culture in the English language textbook(s), this is a difficult question to answer because at that time I did not know the difference between the cultures and I did not know that each English speaking country has their own culture. Therefore, I cannot answer this question"*. She also said that there was nothing mentioned in the English language textbooks in Kurdistan schools about the way of living in UK: *"We were only taught how to pass the exam and nothing more... Even when the teacher was speaking and explaining the lesson she was repeating 'in the exam... when you have the exam... in the exam' and not 'if one day you travel or if you go abroad'"*.

S.H. wanted to know about the English culture more than what she had known since she has arrived in the UK; she has recently taken a course in English language where culture is included

M.D is a 35 year old who came to find a job. He has been living here for more than 6 years. He said that when he first arrived in London he considered himself as a fluent English speaker and he thought that as long as he understood the language, he would have no problem in communicating with the English language speakers. Then later on he realized the importance of cultural knowledge. He mentioned an example about queuing in shops which he used to break in his home country. He said:

"I didn't know that there was a queue and I was not used to queues and the worst thing was that there was no sign to telling to queue. I went crossing the queue to pay and people were just looking at me; it was so strange and that made me feel there was something wrong... but nobody told me, that I had to queue and I didn't know, otherwise I would have stood in the queue like them."

Such problems may happen to every stranger even the well educated people because they lack the awareness of behaving in the English culture.

Most of the interviewees agree that they had learned stereotypes and when they came to UK they were acting according to those stereotypes. They also mentioned that different aspects of culture such as religion, habits, attitudes and values, knowledge of interactions with others and awareness need to be taught in the target language classrooms. This lead to a better understanding of various cultural aspects that will help the learners in their future life rather than general stereotyped information. Furthermore, the interviewees agreed that the cultural part that they had been taught in the curricula was different from real life situations and in the curricula there were no lessons or exercises that would help them practice real language depending on authentic cultural aspects. All interviewees said that cultural knowledge was important and helpful in communicating with the English or people living in UK.

The researcher has found out that when Kurdish people live in a new culture, they face new situations which make communication difficult. This is because they have not been taught the target language culture. Also, the English textbooks in Kurdistan do not include authentic activities or examples taken from the real lifestyle of the target language culture so that learners can practice along with the language in order to know how to behave in certain situations in the lifestyle of the other (English) cultures. For instance, they need to have an idea about friendship values, politeness values, ways of interaction, habits and how to communicate appropriately with other people. All these facets are important to be realised in order to be familiar with the new culture that they live in and the new people that they communicate with (Al Hamir, 2008).

An interesting point that has been noticed is that Kurdish perspectives and opinions have changed after being exposed to a new culture. They realized that not all new aspects were wrong and they found that different culture should not affect their relationships with people. A good example for this is one of the interviewees who was not motivated to live in a new culture as she tried to be careful from everything around her in order to keep her home values and behaviours. However, after a while she decided to discover the new culture and she started to communicate and make friends. She mentioned that she did not think that the new culture is friendly and she is much happier now and she has a clear idea and new experience about the new culture which she much appreciates now.

It is obvious from the analysis and discussion above that Kurdish people have difficulties in communicating with people from different cultures and they have not gained the expected benefits from the cultural, if any, that had been taught in English language classrooms before. There might be some activities regarding culture in the textbook (see appendix 1) but they do not reflect the everyday culture of the target language. Thus, a change in the way of teaching English culture should be considered. It can be also noticed that Kurdish people need to know the culture of the target language as a part of their English language study. They need to understand real life situations and how to deal with them in a new culture along with learning the language to communicate because without learning about the culture of the spoken language learners; they might not be able to communicate with the others appropriately even if they are good at speaking the target language.

5. CONCLUSION

Language and culture complete one another. According to Kurdish context, teaching the target language culture is very important and necessary to Kurdish learners. Moreover, Kurdish people faced a lot of difficulties and cultural challenges when they first came to a foreign country, and they needed to discover all the cultural differences by themselves and try to accept them which sometimes could be hard to adopt some other cultural aspects. Also, Kurdish learners need to learn to be aware of ICC because communication involves knowledge of both cultures and language in order to be successful at communication and to adjust themselves to the new culture. The cultural aspects that the interviewees learnt in English classrooms were not useful at all because it was based on stereotypes, and all agreed that teaching communicative competence and real lifestyle culture is needed in the English language classrooms in Kurdistan.

6. RECOMMENDATIONS

Kurdish learners need to learn the target language culture from the beginning of the language learning process and they should be exposed to different cultural aspects and help to try to accept the differences between cultures. Thus, ICC needs to be taught in English language classrooms in Kurdistan. Moreover, Teaching the target language culture should be added to the curriculum. Learners should be familiar with the culture of the learned language since that language and culture are inseparable and if language is stripped off its culture, it becomes meaningless.

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APPENDICES

Appendix 1:

An activity from the Kurdistan English language curricula:

UNIT 5

Lesson 3

1 Listen to the sentences. Say.

Words with **m** and **b**

There are **biscuits** and **bananas** in the **big blue bag**.

There's **milk** in the **market** on **Monday**.

Are you **bored**? **Buy** a **magazine** in the **market**!

2 Read about tea. Match the pictures with the countries.

There's a very special plant on the hills in India and China. People make the leaves into the world's favourite drink – tea.

In Kurdistan, people drink tea in small glasses with sugar. In Iran and Lebanon they drink tea in the same way.

In China, people drink tea in very small cups. They don't add milk or sugar.

In India, people drink tea in cups with a lot of milk and with sugar and spices.

In England, people drink tea in cups. They add a little milk, and some people add sugar.

You can drink tea in lots of different ways, but it's always delicious!



1 China

2 England

3 Kurdistan

4 India

5 Lebanon

6 Iran

3 Name the countries.

- 1) The tea plant grows on hills in these countries.**
- 2) People drink tea in very small cups. They don't add milk.**
- 3) People drink tea in cups. They add milk, but they don't add a lot of it.**
- 4) People drink tea with spices.**
- 5) People drink tea in the same way as in Kurdistan and Lebanon.**

Appendix 2:

The interview questions:

1- Does cultural knowledge helped you when first living in UK? How? Do the cultural features affect your attitude towards people in the new culture?

2- During your learning experience at school, you heard many stereotypes about different cultures. Did you depend on these stereotypes when you first came to UK or not? Did they affect you?

3- In your learning experience, was the focus of the textbook on the linguistics aspects only or a combination of linguistics and culture? Do you think that you should have been taught different or more things about life her in UK?

4- Did you find any information about culture that you learnt in school useful while living in UK or not?