



Towards the need for a hands-on approach to teaching foreign cultures in the EFL classroom

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Abstract

The need for incorporating culture in EFL instruction has been widely recognized from a theoretical perspective, and a great deal of effort has been expended in terms of educational policy to address this issue. On the other hand, implementing cultural instruction on a practical level remains a considerable challenge; and in educational settings where teachers themselves lack familiarity with the target culture and where educational materials are deficient in this respect, cultural instruction may often be ignored. This study offers a sample task for teaching about culture, illustrating how teachers, as well as learners, can become students of foreign cultures while avoiding common pitfalls.

Keywords

Cultural awareness, ELT, English as a foreign language, Foreign language learning, Lesson planning

Introduction

The need to consider culture as intrinsic to foreign language learning is not a new issue, yet as Çelik (2012), Çelik and Erbay (2013), Sercu (2002) and Wagner (2014) have noted, educators often encounter difficulties in including culture as an integrated element of language instruction. Confusion as to which elements of culture to teach and whose culture should be taught – particularly when it comes English as a foreign language (EFL) instruction, where the definition of *target culture* is notoriously complex (Çelik & Erbay, 2013) – may result in these issues being minimized, or even neglected altogether, in the classroom; and furthermore, when culture is included in a foreign language curriculum, classroom teachers frequently lack sufficient knowledge of the topic, and teaching texts do not always provide an accurate or satisfactory view (Türkan & Çelik, 2007). However, Wagner (2014) points out that cultural instruction does not have to consist of knowledge that is handed down from the teacher to the students; nor does it have to rely solely on the material presented in teaching texts. Rather, learning about culture can become a mutual, hands-on exploration that allows both learners and their teacher to discover not only elements of foreign cultures, but also facets of their home culture they may not have previously considered, and to reflect critically on both. By engaging in active



learning, children are more likely to perceive a lesson as meaningful and to internalize the new material (Cameron, 2001).

A Sample Lesson Plan for Teaching about Culture

The lesson plan presented here demonstrates how teachers and learners can work together toward an understanding and appreciation of culture in a way that meets the needs of learners, in addition to curricular requirements. Throughout the process, research-based considerations are addressed. While a specific age group and proficiency level is addressed here, the lesson can be adapted to accommodate learners of varying ages and abilities, and in a wide range of learning contexts.

Lesson Theme: “What Do You Like for Breakfast?”

In order for effective learning to take place, learners should be able to relate to the lesson; in other words, it should have some relevance to their experience (Hymes, 1972; Widdowson, 1978). Therefore, cultural instruction should involve familiar topics, rather than abstract concepts that will have no meaning beyond the lesson. In this example, young learners will focus on the names of various food and drinks as they talk about traditional breakfast items from home and international cultures.

Age and Proficiency Level of Learners

This lesson targets beginning learners in the 4th grade, or 8 ½ - 9 years, in terms of Turkish primary education. Prior knowledge of the communicative function *expressing likes and dislikes* (e.g., “I like ...”; “He does not like”; “Do you like...?”) (MoNE, 2013) is assumed.

Learning Objectives

In this example, culture and language learning are presented side-by-side in order to demonstrate how the two elements can be successfully combined. By doing so, learners have the opportunity to see how the language really “works” in an authentic communicative environment (Hymes, 1972; Widdowson, 1978). At the same time, they are given the opportunity to reflect on the similarities and differences between home and world cultures.

The learning objectives in this example are drawn from the Turkish elementary English language teaching (ELT) program, addressing the curricular goals provided for Grade 4, in unit 10 of a 10-unit course (MoNE, 2013). See Figure 1 (below) for details on the communicative functions, lexis/language use, and intercultural awareness aspects of the unit.

Unit/Theme	Communicative Functions and Skills	Suggested Lexis/Language Use	Suggested Text and Activity Types	Assessment
<p>10</p> <p><i>Food and Drinks</i></p>	<p>Accepting and refusing</p> <p>Expressing basic needs</p> <p>Expressing feelings</p> <p>Making simple inquiries</p> <p>Making simple requests</p> <p>Listening</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Students will be able to recognize simple words and phrases about food and drinks. • Students will be able to comprehend offers about their basic needs. • Students will be able to identify others' needs and feelings if stated in simple and clear speech. <p>Speaking</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Students will be able to ask and answer questions, initiate and respond to simple statements about their basic needs and feelings • Students will be able to express how they feel and what they want in simple and short sentences and phrases. <p>Intercultural Awareness</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Students will be able to identify popular food across cultures. 	<p>bread butter cheese cupcake, -s honey milk olive, -s pasta soup tea</p> <p>now/later</p> <p>Are you hungry? — Yes, I am, and I want some ..., please. — No, I'm not hungry.</p> <p>Do you want a sandwich? Want a sandwich? Would you like a sandwich? — No, thanks. I'm full. — Yes, please.</p> <p>What about an apple? — Not now, thanks. — No, thanks, maybe later.</p> <p>Is she thirsty? — Yes, she is. / No, she isn't. I want some milk, please.</p> <p>Pizza, sushi, kebab, fish and chips, Turkish delight Pizza is an Italian food.</p>	<p>Texts</p> <p>Advertisements Captions Cartoons Conversations Coupons Illustrations Lists Menus Picture Dictionaries Posters Products Rhymes Signs Songs Stories Tables</p> <p>Activities:</p> <p>Arts and Crafts Chants and Songs Communicative Tasks Drama/Miming Drawing and Coloring Flashcards Games Labeling Listening Matching Questions and Answers Real-life Tasks Role-Play and Simulations Speaking Storytelling TPR.</p>	<p>Projects</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Students prepare a card game of matching pairs of pictures of food and drinks to play individually or in groups. • Students prepare a menu for an imaginary restaurant by using drawings and visuals. <p>Dossier</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Students complete and hand in the European Language Portfolio.

In accordance with the curricular goals outlined above, the lesson objectives are as follows:

1. Learners will be able to recognize simple phrases related to food and drinks, and to ask and answer questions about their basic needs and feelings.
2. Learners will be able to identify popular food items from international cultures.

Duration of the Lesson

The lesson may be carried out over the course of 2-3 class periods; the plan may be modified and elements may be included or excluded as needed by classroom teachers to meet any time constraints within their learning context.

Preparation

If Internet access is available in the classroom, the teacher should identify appropriate web pages describing traditional breakfast foods of world cultures. Otherwise, the teacher should collect information, with as many visuals as possible, on breakfast foods from numerous cultures, including home culture, various English-speaking cultures, and cultures from around the world.

Materials/Resources

Suggested materials for the lesson include paper, crayons, pencils and scissors, as well as classroom Internet (if available).

Procedure

1. The teacher introduces communicative functions such as *“Are you hungry? Yes I am! / No, I am not hungry” ... “Would you like ...?” “Yes /No thanks, I’m full,” “I want some ..., please,”* as well as the words for common foods and drinks associated with breakfast (e.g., *milk, honey, olives, bread, butter, cheese, cereal, tea,* etc.). Learners practice asking and answering as a class or in small groups, talking about the breakfast foods that they would like/would not like to eat.
2. The teacher and learners work together to discover what children in other cultures eat for breakfast, using either Internet resources or materials the teacher has brought to class. The teacher may call attention to similarities and differences between international cultures and home culture (e.g., *“Who eats eggs for breakfast?”*). As with any lesson on culture, the teacher should take care not to emphasize one tradition as inferior or superior to the others (Çelik, 2012).
3. Learners work in groups and are allowed to choose a culture (using both home and world cultures). With support from the teacher, learners will create a simple role play around a restaurant theme or family setting, asking and answering what they would like to have for breakfast according to the culture they have chosen.

E.g.:

Turkish culture: *“What would you like for breakfast?” “I would like bread, cheese, honey, olives and tea.”*

American culture: *“Would you like eggs for breakfast? “Yes, please” / “No, I want pancakes and sausage, please!”*

Slovakian culture: *“Are you hungry?” “Yes, I want bread and eggs and meat!” “No, I am thirsty. I would like some juice, please.”*

Japanese culture: *“Would you like rice, soup, and fish?” “No thank you, I want tea.”*

4. Learners work in groups to prepare posters with the title *“My (Turkish/American/English/Japanese/etc.) Breakfast,”* drawing and labeling the related breakfast foods and drinks. Each group presents the finished poster to the class (or, with the support of the teacher, students can create PowerPoint slides of the breakfast items and combine them for a class presentation). As an alternative to the group posters/PowerPoint slides,

learners may create individual drawings and present them to the class. If applicable, the drawings can then be added to a language learning portfolio.

Conclusion

The sample lesson presented here demonstrates how culture can be effectively incorporated in English language teaching in a manner that is both engaging and meaningful to learners. No specialized knowledge is required of the classroom teacher, and the cultural aspects of the lesson are taught in tandem with the required language skills, rather than treated as a separate issue. The structure of the lesson allows for authentic communication in the target language; furthermore, learners are encouraged to notice the similarities and differences between home, target and world cultures as they explore a familiar and appealing topic in a supportive environment.

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