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Teaching A Foreign Language From A Cultural Perspective

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Abstract

Problem Statement: what is culture and is it important for the foreign language teaching? The term “culture” encompasses several aspects of a country: the people, their thoughts, their beliefs, their language, their traditions, etc. **Purpose of Study:** Proving the importance of culture in the foreign language classes. A dry language course can teach the learners to say what is correct and acceptable only. But the learners also need to know what is appropriate for the target society and what is not. This can only be achieved if they learn about the culture, the traditions and the people, while learning their language. **Methods:** Questionnaire to teachers and students. In order to be able to decide on which aspects of the culture the learners mostly need to learn about, two questionnaires have been given out to the learners as well as to their teachers to gather their points of view. **Findings and Results:** Pie charts showing the results of the questionnaires According to these responses, the most important aspects of the target culture, in this case, the Egyptian culture, that the non-native learners of the target language (Egyptian Arabic) need to learn were defined and put into order of importance. **Conclusions and Recommendations:** Suggesting ways of integrating culture into the foreign language syllabus. One teaching unit as a guideline for course designers as well as for teachers was designed to suggest how these cultural aspects could be introduced into the language class.

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1. Introduction

The term culture that is gaining more and more importance nowadays encompasses in fact several aspects of a

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country; it refers to the people, their thoughts, their beliefs, their language, their traditions, etc. According to Rehbein (1985) [1] culture refers to “everyday life”, a definition that is consistent with the old American definition of culture as “way of life”. If the learner of a language does not have enough information about the target culture, he will fall into the cultural gap, and face cultural conflicts. That is why, linguists and teachers try to help learners of a foreign language cross the cultural gap, avoid cultural conflicts and achieve intercultural communication. In my research, I am trying to talk about the pedagogical implications that are important for helping the learners of a foreign language reach cultural continuity.

Nomenclature

A	cultural gap: the information missing in the minds of the members of a culture about another culture
B	cultural conflicts: the problems that take place due to misunderstandings caused by the cultural gap
C	intercultural communication: the communication between two different cultures
D	cultural continuity: mingling with the target culture and communicating with its members successfully
E	pedagogical implications: the consequences that may affect the teaching process

1.1. Problem Statement

In fact, it was a cultural conflict that was the main reason this research was written. A foreign lady admired my new bracelet, and following Egyptian Etiquette, I told her “etfaddali” which means in Arabic, please take it, so the lady actually took it. Anyone else would have started to build a negative stereotype of that foreigner’s country and citizens. However, being a linguist and a teacher of three languages as foreign languages; namely Arabic, German and English, I started thinking why such a conflict took place and realized that the misunderstanding was twofold: on the one hand, I did not know that an offer in other foreign cultures is taken literally, and on the other hand, the foreign lady did not know that such offers in Egyptian culture are just a way for showing hospitality. In other words, the conflict did not take place because of a language misunderstanding but because of a cultural one.

1.2. The Importance of Culture For the Foreign Language Class

As a matter of fact, such conflicts take place all over the world and as a result, a number of misunderstandings occur and sometimes end up in destroying the relationship between people from different cultures. That is why I realised that communicative competence (the knowledge of how to use language appropriately) is more important than linguistic competence (the unconscious knowledge of language structure). Therefore, I decided to make this issue the main focus of my research. A dry language course can teach the learners to say what is correct and acceptable only. But the learners also need to know what is appropriate for the target society and what is not. This can only be achieved if they learn about the culture, the traditions and the people, while learning their language. Moreover, referring to the *Standards for Foreign Language Learning in the 21st Century* document, Holmes (2012) [2] adds that the true content of the foreign language course is not the grammar and vocabulary of the language, but the cultures expressed through that language.

2.The Methodology: Questionnaire

In order to be able to decide on which aspects of the Egyptian culture the learners of Egyptian Colloquial Arabic as a Foreign Language mostly need to learn about, two questionnaires have been given out to the learners as well as to their teachers to gather their points of view. The following is one question of the second questionnaire that was given to the students, as an example.

Please give your answers numbers ranging between + 3 and – 3 where : + 3=**extremely important**, 0=**neutral**, -3=**extremely unimportant**

G) I need to understand these aspects of the Egyptian culture:

- Egyptian people
- Social levels
- Financial levels
- Ethnic groups
- Customs & traditions
- Polite etiquette: do it!
- Rude behavior: don't do it!
- Family relationships
- Friendship
- Man in the society
- Woman in the society
- Men-women status
- Marriage
- Interpersonal relations
- Youth & children
- Old people
- Feasts & festivals
- Beliefs & religion
- Social life
- Language & communication
- Idiomatic expressions
- Proverbs
- Gestures
- Social values
- Taboos
- Work & professions
- Trade & business
- Politics
- Education
- Social aspects of clothing
- Privacy
- Foods
- Literature
- Music
- Health
- In-laws
- Other, pls. Specify:

3. Findings and Results

Putting all the answers of the students together with the answers of their teachers, the average was taken, and pie charts were drawn with the results. The following figure (Figure 1) shows the answer to one of the important questions of the questionnaires just as an example. To highlight the items with the highest percentages, they are slightly taken out of the pie chart.

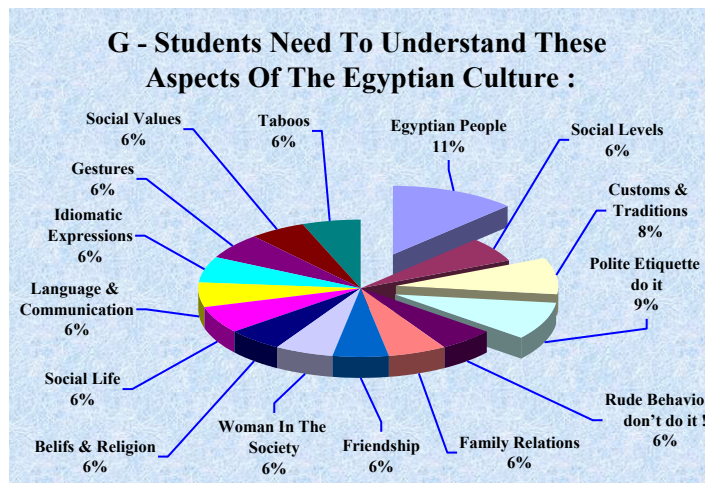


Figure 1

According to these responses, the most important aspects of the target culture, in this case, the Egyptian culture, that the non native learners of the target language (Egyptian Arabic) need to learn were defined and put into order of importance:

- Egyptian people (11%)
- Polite etiquette: "do it" & customs and traditions nearly equally (9% and 8%)

4.Conclusions:

In order to suggest ways of integrating culture into the foreign language syllabus one teaching unit as a guideline for course designers as well as for teachers was designed to suggest how these cultural aspects could be introduced into the language class. The learners watch part of a video with a certain cultural scene. Before watching how the native speakers act, they are asked how they would behave in such a situation. Then they watch the rest and practice the dialogue as the appropriate input. Later they watch foreign actors in the same situation but acting inappropriately. They have to find out the cultural mistakes and correct them. Finally they are encouraged to talk about their own cultures, how similar or different it is. After focusing on culture, the lesson would go on, now focusing on language.

5.Guidelines:

Among many others, Hansen (1996) [3] has a certain aim for his learners, which is not very different from my own:

- To train the learners on verbal and nonverbal behaviour in daily life situations,
- To acquaint them with foreign cultural phenomena, and
- To help them understand themselves as well as the foreign part.

To achieve this, the lesson should use the experience of the students and to activate their knowledge. It should also enable students to take an active part in class. Moreover and most important it should help students to think about, compare and contrast their own culture with the foreign one.

6.Recommendations:

- It is recommended to use the lesson plan as a guide to prepare a whole teaching syllabus.
- The Methodology used could be adapted for any foreign language course, not just Arabic.

- Helping your learners tolerate the target culture will highly motivate them to learn the target language. Moreover, it renders their study of the target language in its country worth the travel and more practical.
- Helping learners understand other nations, tolerating other ideas, respecting other cultures is the aim of all people now; hopefully then we can have peace on our globe.

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