

## THE SIGNIFICANCE OF OVERT CULTURE TEACHING CLASSES IN BOOSTING EFL LEARNERS' COMMUNICATIVE COMPETENCE

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### Abstract

The need for explicit culture integration in EFL education has long been highlighted and acknowledged in countless studies. Yet, it seems to be a common practice that foreign language teachers frequently neglect the conclusions drawn from such studies and give great importance to the development of students' four basic language skills, namely, listening, speaking, reading and writing; focusing on student's test-taking skills and neglecting their communication skills and competencies, the underlying principles of foreign language learning. The researcher draws attention to this neglect and believes that EFL students' communicative failure and communicative competence are likely to be overcome and achieved, correspondingly, if EFL teachers give equal attention to the development of the learners' pragmatic competence as they always do with the learners' linguistic competence in their EFL classrooms. Based on the belief that, successful learning is all about motivation, the researcher exposes the idea that the integration of a planned culture teaching in EFL education will cause an increase in interest in FL learning and a subsequent success in enhancing EFL learners' communicative competence.

**Keywords:** Overt culture teaching, EFL learners, communicative competence.

### 1. INTRODUCTION

The age of globalisation and its rapidity has increased the need for cross-cultural communication in order to have access to information throughout the world. This non-stop need leads to a growth of interest in the foreign language teaching profession. Hence, learning English as a second or foreign language has become a requirement to survive in today's world to keep up with the information age. The idea that foreign language teaching has a cultural dimension is not a new one. However, it is only recently (Byram, M. and Fleming: 1998) that its importance in foreign language education is recognized and given due regard. The present paper focuses on the teaching of culture in the foreign language classroom and attempts to explain the efficacy of explicit culture teaching on enhancing EFL learners' communication competence. The current investigation is believed to be helpful for EFL researchers and teachers who inquire about the factors that may improve EFL students' communication competence.

### 2. DEFINING CULTURE

There have been different definitions of culture in the literature. In one definition, it is the shared knowledge and schemes created by set of people for perceiving, interpreting, expressing, and responding to social realities around them (Lederach, 1995). In another definition, culture includes a system of shared beliefs, values, customs, behaviors and artifacts that members of a society use to interact with their world and one. In its simplest sense, culture is the learned and shared behavior of a community of interacting human beings.

In the past, culture was viewed as a static entity without reference to variation. Thus, it was believed that culture was made up of classified and observable facts, which can be taught and learned directly. This view of culture did not recognize the variability of behavior within different layers of the culture, and interaction of language and culture in the making of meaning (Moore, 1991). Recently, there has been a shift in the perception of culture and it is viewed as dynamic and variable. Culture is not seen as providing factual information but as a process which shapes human behavior and interaction (Furstenberg, 2010). In other words, culture is continuously changing and there is variation among the members with reference to behavior. This shift has led to a view where culture is not specific but rather general; hence, vital in intercultural communication.

### 3. DEFINING COMMUNICATION COMPETENCE

The term communication competence was coined by Dell Hymes in 1966, reacting against the perceived inadequacy of Noam Chomsky's (1965) distinction between *competence* and *performance*. Communication

competence refers to a language user's grammatical knowledge of syntax, morphology, phonology and the like, as well as social knowledge about how and when to use utterances appropriately. Therefore, such competence comprises both the linguistic and pragmatic aspects of a language. In short, communicative competence is represented by the ability to use a language effectively for communication purposes.

Canale and Swain (1980) define communicative competence in terms of three components. The first element is "Grammatical Competence". It refers to one's knowledge about how to use the grammar, syntax, and vocabulary of a language. Linguistic competence asks: What words do I use? How do I put them into phrases and sentences? The second component has to do with the "Sociolinguistic Competence". It entails knowing how to use and respond to language appropriately, given the setting, the topic, and the relationships among the people communicating. Sociolinguistic competence asks: Which words and phrases fit this setting and this topic? How can I express a specific attitude (courtesy, authority, friendliness, respect) when I need to? How do I know what attitude another person is expressing? The last one is represented by "Strategic Competence". It implies knowing how to recognize and repair communication breakdowns, how to work around gaps in one's knowledge of the language, and how to learn more about the language and in the context. Strategic competence asks: How do I know when I've misunderstood or when someone has misunderstood me? What do I say then? How can I express my ideas if I don't know the name of something or the right verb form to use? In sum, communicative competence has mainly two facets, namely, linguistic and pragmatic aspects.

#### 4. CULTURE AND EFL LEARNERS' COMMUNICATIVE COMPETENCE

In the current years, there has been a growing interest in the cultural dimension of foreign language education and teachers today are expected to promote the acquisition of intercultural competence in their learners as their mastery of the linguistic elements alone does not guarantee they will be able to communicate through a language. According to Hymes (1972) the speakers of a language need more than grammatical competence to be able to communicate effectively in a language.

English as a communication tool needs more than the acquisition of linguistic competence and communicative competence. It rather entails an increase in learners' familiarity with the language's cultural background, an expansion of the learners' cultural awareness and intercultural competence. In his part, Pulverness (2002: 8) asserts that *"in teaching English for communication and neglecting culture, we may actually be giving learners access to an impoverished means of communication, effective for survival and routine transactions, but lacking much of the cultural resonance that makes it fully meaningful for native speakers"*. In fact, cultural awareness falls into the category of the pragmatic aspect of communication competence which is described as the ability to understand different modes of thinking and living of members of a culture and thus behave in a way that would be understood by the members of the culture in the intended way. Lado (1957) argued that lack of cultural competence in the target language would surely lead to transfer from the native language to the target language. The learners' transfer can easily result in regrettable misunderstanding in cross-cultural communication. For example, a seemingly serious word may cause an English native speaker to laugh his head off while a non-native English speaker still does not know where the humour lies; or an enquiry by a nonnative speaker may be misconstrued by a native speaker as an attempt to invade his privacy. Owing to cultural knowledge students can develop an understanding of all aspects of a culture, but particularly the social structure, the values and beliefs of the people, and the way things are assumed to be done. Therefore, foreign language culture teaching should be carried out explicitly and implicitly in foreign language teaching as *"culture enhances or even inhibits communication"* (Thanassoulas, 2001:3).

Successful EFL communicative competence hardly ever takes place unless EFL learners obtain cultural knowledge of the language they are learning as communicating internationally inevitably involves communicating interculturally. Following this; EFL learning is no longer defined in terms of the acquisition of communicative competence in the English language, which refers to a person's ability to act in a foreign language in linguistically, sociolinguistically and pragmatically appropriate ways (Council of Europe, 2001 as cited in Gu *et al*, 2012). Rather, it is defined in terms of the intercultural competence, which is the *"ability to interact effectively with people from cultures that we recognize as different from our own"* (Guilherme, 2000: 297-300). Byram (1997: 42) asserts that the success of interaction implies not only an effective interchange of information, as was the goal of communicative language teaching, but also the *"the ability to take up the other's perspective on their own culture, anticipating and where possible, resolving dysfunctions in communication and behaviour."*

## 5. EFL LEARNERS' CULTURAL AWARENESS SHORTAGE AND COMMUNICATION PROBLEMS

As every culture has its own cultural norms for conversation which differ from one culture to the other, communication problems may arise among speakers who do not know or share the norms of the target culture, though the correct grammatical structures of their utterances. In more special terms, the nonnative speakers are more subject *pragmatic failure* due to their violations of cultural norms of appropriateness in their communication with native speakers. Definitions, types and sources of pragmatic failure will be reviewed in the coming subsections.

### 5.1. Defining Pragmatic Failure

He Ziran (1988) points out that pragmatic failure refers to "failure to achieve the desired communicative effect in communication". He further indicates that "Pragmatic failures are not the errors in diction, but those mistakes failing to fulfill communication because of infelicitous style, incompatible expressions, and improper habit." (He Ziran, 1997). For Qian Guanlian (2002) defines pragmatic failure in a more specific way by pointing out that "Pragmatic failure is committed when the speaker uses grammatically correct sentences, but unconsciously violates the interpersonal relationship rules, social conventions, or takes little notice of time, space and addressee."

### 5.2 Classification of Pragmatic Failure

He Ziran (2004) points out that pragmatic failure has the following three manifestations: pragmalinguistic failure, sociopragmatic failure and pragmatic failure in cross-cultural communication. Pragmalinguistic failure can be considered from both sides of the conversation. On the one hand, the speaker commits pragmatic failure because he takes for granted that the listener is able to understand his meaning and he thus makes an inappropriate utterance. On the other hand, the listener commits pragmatic failure by deducing the meaning of the speaker's utterance incorrectly. Sociopragmatic failure occurs when the speaker does not give concern to the identity and social status of the listener during the conversation. He may produce pragmatic failure by using a polite form of expression toward a close person or someone of a lower social status; or by addressing a remote person or someone of a higher social status with an intimate form. The speaker's lack of knowledge about the politeness principle of social interaction is a major cause of sociopragmatic failure.

He Ziran (ibid.) points out that pragmatic failure in cross-cultural communication occurs under the following four circumstances:

- a. The speaker chooses an inappropriate topic. Different cultures usually have different beliefs, value views and living habits. Therefore, people need to distinguish between free and constrained topics in intercultural communication.
- b. The speaker uses expressions which have different implications in the target language, or which deviate from his own intention in producing such utterance. This kind of pragmatic failure commonly happens in greetings. Besides, misuse of fixed expressions in the target language also gives rise to misunderstanding.
- c. The utterance made by the speaker to express a certain idea does not conform to the convention of the target language. Since people with different cultural backgrounds tend to use different expressions and strategies to convey the same information, they tend to commit pragmatic failure while speaking a language other than their mother tongue.
- d. A participant in a conversation makes an inappropriate response to a certain question or statement. He Ziran (2004) points out that Chinese people prefer to show their modesty while being complimented, however, on the contrary, people in the west like to show their talents directly and would accept praise happily.

To solve the EFL learners' pragmatic failure in their communication with foreigners, it is important for EFL teachers to consider the sources of their learners' pragmatic failure to later on consider some doings in the area of pragmatic and cultural pedagogy.

### 5.3 Sources of Pragmatic Failure

Pragmatic failure is unavoidable between EFL learners and English native speakers and other non- native English speakers. Yet, this does not mean that EFL teachers and learners will take this issue for granted. Instead, they should deal with the situation by seeking for the main sources of their learners' pragmatic

failure for the sake of reducing it. Researchers like: Thomas, 1983; He Ziran, 1988, 2004; Huang Cidong, 1988; Qian Guanlian, 2002 and Kasper, 1992 relate foreign language learners' pragmatic failure to: (a) cultural difference, (b) negative pragmatic transfer. Other minor sources may include teachers and learners induced errors and native speakers' tolerance towards nonnative speakers' pragmatic failure.

### 5.3.1 Cultural Difference

Barriers in cross-cultural communication are inevitable between participants from different cultural backgrounds. Differences in social conventions, value views, thinking patterns, social habits and customs are all sources of pragmatic failure. In this context, J. Thomas (1983) says *"different cultures have different ways of thinking, rules of speaking, social values and relative weights of pragmatic principles, and these cross-culturally different assessments of social parameters have negatively affected language users' linguistic choices, which finally result in sociopragmatic failure."* In other words, in intercultural interaction, communicators from different cultures stick on their own cultural conventions and behave on the way they believe is appropriate and so, they find it difficult to adapt to each other's manner of speaking and they will commit pragmatic failure which unavoidably leads to misunderstanding. To illustrate this, Qian Guanlian (2002), in an investigation into Chinese pragmatic failure from the cultural perspective, notes down that Chinese people believe that it is extremely impolite and even arrogant to reply to compliments by directly saying "thank you"; instead, they are taught to show their modesty by declaring that what they have done is not good enough or there is still room for improvement. However, native English speakers usually accept compliments naturally without feeling embarrassed.

### 5.3.2 Negative Pragmatic Transfer

Both Thomas and Kasper attribute pragmatic failure to negative pragmatic transfer. Kasper (1992) defines pragmatic transfer as *"the influence exerted by learners' pragmatic knowledge of languages and cultures other than L2 on their comprehension, production, and acquisition of L2 pragmatic information."* In different words, pragmatic transfer refers to the learner's use of his native language linguistic and pragmatic information in the second language pragmatic context. Pragmatic transfer is qualified as negative when it drives communicators into pragmatic failure while interacting.

Negative pragmatic transfer has two types: negative transfer of native linguistic knowledge and negative transfer of native cultural conventions. In the former, learners may confuse their native language system with the new linguistic system of their second or foreign language and apply it in their target language use. This, as a consequent, causes negative transfer which can affect the phonological, semantic or syntactic system of the target language. A good example of negative transfer of native language linguistic knowledge is the Arab EFL learners' misuse of the preposition *to* in the collocation *go home*. In fact, in the Arabic language, the preposition *to* which is in Arabic language إلى /ilæ/ does exist in the Arabic sentence أنا ذاهب إلى المنزل which mean in English 'I'm going home'. As the sentence demonstrates, while speaking English the preposition *to* is not used. Affected by their Arabic linguistic knowledge, Arab EFL learners are likely to commit pragmatic failure by misusing the preposition *to*.

Being influenced greatly by the cultural conventions of their own country, EFL learners may subconsciously apply the conventions of their mother tongue to the target language context while communicating with foreigners, which can cause misunderstandings or even breakdowns in communication. In Algeria, as in many other Islamic countries, it is a convention for to ask people, both males and females, about their age while meeting, for example, in chat-rooms or elsewhere. However, British native speakers do not ask such private question to women as this query is considered as a taboo question in their culture. Therefore, in cross-cultural communication, if an Algerian asks a British woman about her age, he may be considered impolite and the latter may not be willingly to continue the conversation.

### 5.3.3 Teaching and Learning Induced Errors:

In countries where English is taught and learnt as a second foreign language, Algeria included, students do not have many opportunities to be exposed to authentic English environment and to communicate with native speakers. Apart from the Internet, in today's world, English classes and books are the main sources of

the foreign culture and pragmatic knowledge. However, some techniques applied by EFL teachers and learners may increase the likelihood of pragmatic failure.

The significant reason why EFL teachers and learners induce errors lays in the fact that English teaching and learning process is set far from the rationale of foreign language learning, i.e. intercultural communicative competence, as the actual EFL teaching and learning goal in some non-English speaking countries may be examination-oriented goal and mark-oriented goal for many EFL teachers and learners, respectively. This means that, the significant role of English teaching is to develop EFL learners' test taking skills and that the main goal of English learning is to achieve average or good scores in all kinds of exams. Though, it is advocated that students' skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing should be developed equally, the skills and the language that are developed in English classes are only those needed in examinations rather than practical use. This is due to the fact that even students who have high scores in exams may often experience pragmatic failure in real life communication.

Another teaching induced error is the insufficient or, sometimes, even the inappropriate pragmatic teaching of the foreign language cultural aspects that are needed in cross-cultural communication. Actually, in some non-English speaking countries, Algeria included some culture-based modules in the foreign languages departments at its universities, Tlemcen for instance, are largely based on what is known as 'big C' culture aspects rather than 'little c' culture. The former refers to the great achievements and events of the foreign culture society, as well as its geographical characteristics, historical events, leaders, major cities, products, artistic achievements, religions and ceremonies. The latter, covers mostly the characteristics, values, beliefs, behaviours and daily routines in general of the people who make up the target culture.

#### **5.3.4 Foreigners' Tolerance towards EFL Speakers' Pragmatic Failure:**

It seems to be a common practice that native English speakers do not always point out and try to correct EFL speakers' pragmatic failure. Though, this may ensure the smooth continuation of the communication, the students will lose the opportunity to realize their mistakes and thus not be able to make improvements to reduce the possibility of pragmatic failure in future interactions.

Since the pragmatic failures are caused by the students' lack of pragmatic knowledge and cultural information associated with the target language, the following are some suggestions as to what college English teachers can do in the areas of pragmatic and cultural pedagogy.

## **6. IMPLICATIONS FOR EFFECTIVE CULTURAL PEDAGOGY IN EFL CLASSROOMS**

It worth to mention again that though culture integration in EFL education has long been highlighted and acknowledged in countless studies, foreign language teachers frequently still overlook the conclusions drawn from such studies and give great importance to the development of students' test taking skills and neglecting their communication skills, the foundation of foreign language learning. Yet, teachers should be sensitive to the learners' fragility while considering pragmatic and cultural pedagogy in their EFL classrooms, so as not to cause them underestimate or overestimate foreign cultures but to enrich learners' pragmatic knowledge to ensure communication competence and understand and appreciate the culture of others especially in a time many nations are groping their way in the age of globalization.

- Designing a cultural syllabus:

A cultural syllabus should not be based solely on 'Big C' culture themes but more importantly on 'little c' culture themes; as such themes are needed for intercultural communication than the big C culture issues. Corresponding with the concepts of big "C" and little "c" culture, many cultural frameworks regarding specific aspects of cultural learning in EFL classroom were proposed in relevant research. Chen (2004), proposed a cultural framework on the model conceptualized by Lessard-Clouston (1996). Chen's framework includes seven themes under Big "C" (music, social norms, education, economy, politics, history and geography and nine themes under little "c" (daily routine, lifestyle, holiday, food, gesture, weather, greeting, customs and values).

- Creating a culture-rich learning environment

This means that EFL teachers in need to not simply invite learners to read a passage about 'dining customs' in Britain or America but also to act out roles of waiters and customers at a restaurant in the USA or UK, after having supplied them with the necessary information about the foreign culture dining customs of

course. These role playing activities are useful for effective communication since they prepare learners for real communication with native speakers of English.

- Providing more authentic teaching materials

In order to increase English learners' pragmatic competence, more authentic teaching materials should be provided. Authentic materials refer to those that involve the social conventions, customs, habits, and culture of the target language. Apart from textbooks, students can boarder their knowledge about the foreign culture by reading English novels, magazines and newspapers or by watching movies and TV serials.

- *Developing EFL teacher's competence*

As teachers are responsible for transmitting linguistic and pragmatic knowledge about the target language to their learners, they have to broaden their linguistic and cultural knowledge about the target language through self-study and make good use of all the available resources, which include all kinds of academic journals, books, academic conferences, research projects, and short-term courses abroad and to improve their language proficiency. In order to be qualified, teachers must keep on studying to keep up with changes in the English language, its culture and society. Since many teachers are not confident in their own knowledge of pragmatics, they should actively try to seek and read some related books or materials related to pragmatics to develop their English competence.

## 7. CONCLUSION

In accordance with what has been reviewed in this paper, EFL learners are subject to problems in their intercommunication due to the learners' lack of foreign cultural knowledge and pragmatic competence of the foreign language they are learning. In an attempt to reduce EFL learners' pragmatic failure, 'little c' culture teaching should be explicit in EFL classroom and EFL teachers and learners should actively try to develop their knowledge about the foreign culture to be competent teachers, learners and communicators as well.

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