

## Cultural constrains in foreign language learning in Iranian context

Ghaemi, Farid ✉

Islamic Azad University, Karaj Branch, Iran ([ghaemi@kiaau.ac.ir](mailto:ghaemi@kiaau.ac.ir))

Oghabi, Maryam

Shahid Bahonar University of Kerman, Iran ([Oghabi444@yahoo.com](mailto:Oghabi444@yahoo.com))



ISSN: 2243-7754  
Online ISSN: 2243-7762

OPEN ACCESS

Received: 24 May 2015

Revised: 30 August 2015

Accepted: 12 September 2015

Available Online: 2 November 2015

DOI: 10.5861/ijrsl.2015.1250

### *Abstract*

Teaching and learning a foreign language is tightly interwoven with getting familiar with the cultural values of that language. According to Zhang and Yan (2006), learning a language means acquiring a set of pragmatic norms and cultural values embodied in the target language. However, deep cultural differences among countries sometimes turn it to a challenging job to the teachers to keep the dialogue between the two cultures. Teachers, parents and educational systems in some countries have deep concerns about the interfering effects of the contradictory cultural values of the two languages on the personal identity of the students. The present article attempts to give an overview of the cultural constraints of foreign language learning in Iranian context and discusses the issue in two areas of material development and language teaching and tries to provide some guidelines in this regard. Findings of the study proved that teachers can focus on cultural differences and explain them in a way that awareness of a foreign culture contributes to understanding the students' own culture. Respecting the learners' culture is essential for any EFL teacher (Lindsay, 2000), while teachers should focus on teaching cultural values of the target language with implying tone that no culture is superior to another. The cultural values are better to be presented to the learners considering their age, level of understanding and maturity to avoid misunderstanding and negative effects on their personal identity.

**Keywords:** material development; cultural values; cultural differences; cultural imperialism; cultural constraints

## Cultural constrains in foreign language learning in Iranian context

### 1. Introduction

There are a variety of factors that need to be considered in the process of second/foreign language learning. Culture, as an inseparable part of any language, cannot be ignored and as Paige, Jorstad, Siaya, Klein, and Colby (2003) emphasized, it must be integrated with language teaching. Brown (2007a) also confirmed that language is a part of culture, and culture is a part of language; the two are intricately interwoven so that one cannot separate the two without losing the significance of either language or culture. In addition, Brown (2007a) defined culture as “the ideas, customs, skills, arts, and tools that characterize a certain group of people in a given period of time” (p. 177). Kramsch (2003) also emphasized that “Culture is an interpersonal process of meaning construction. The meaning of an utterance is neither solely in its reference to the outside world nor only in the intention of its speaker, but rather, speaker and hearer jointly construct it in their efforts to find a common ground of understanding” (pp. 21–22).

Learning culture is a complicated job and “the field is highly interdisciplinary in nature; contributions to [this area] have come from psychology, linguistics, anthropology, education, intercultural communication, and elsewhere” (Paige et al., 2003, p. 1). However, when it comes to the context of classroom, explication of the cultural issues is the job of the teachers, since the students mostly need to deal with the cultural concepts of the target language through different classroom activities and while working on different types of material and as Lindsay (2000) pointed out, successful teachers need to find a culturally appropriate context for any linguistic item they teach. On the other hand, the native language culture is possessed by all language learners (both EFL and ESL learners) and is always present in all English classes and cultural differences may become challenging to both teachers (to explain and clarify the point) and students (to understand the point). The effects of cultural differences on the development of personal identity of the students or cultural imperialism (in the worst case) are also some issues of concern to both parents and governments in some countries. Therefore, considering all these challenges, how should the language teachers and material designers deal with cultural differences between first language and second languages? How can first language be in dialogue with second language?

The present article is an attempt to give an overview of the cultural constraints of foreign language learning in Iranian context and discusses the issue in two areas of material development and language teaching and tries to provide some guidelines in this regard.

### 2. Culture and Material Development

Being an international language, English is widely used for the purpose of communication today and applying communicative approaches to language teaching (e.g. communicative language teaching) is highly recommended in courses that aim for developing communicative competence. Communicative language teaching (CLT) views material as a way of influencing the quality of classroom interaction and language use and therefore, puts emphasis on the primary role of material in promoting communicative language use (Richards & Rodgers, 2001). When it comes to the concept of culture, “Peterson and Coltrane (2003) indicated that cultural activities as well as objectives should be carefully and clearly organized and incorporated into lesson plans” (cited in Tran, 2010, p. 23). Proponents of CLT advocate teaching authentic material in language classrooms for making the students familiar with the real life and communicative functions of the target language. However, the effect of getting familiar with target language culture, mostly implied in authentic texts, on the students’ learning and its positive and potential negative effects sometimes get challenging in some countries.

In Iran, English textbooks of different school grades are developed by the ministry of education and while the focus of attention is mostly on language form, cultural concepts of the target language are either missing or

totally modified to the national and Islamic values. It seems that the Iranian textbook designers are more or less reluctant to involve English cultural values in school textbooks.

In the case of employing internationally published materials, as mentioned by Mokhtarnia (2011), “some modifications in terms of cultural contents are carried out by the ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance which include putting Islamic head cover or modest clothing on women in pictures of the books and replacing expressions incompatible with Islamic culture, such as alcoholic drinks, dance, pork, some music styles, among some others with more “neutral” terms” (p. 2000). Similar problems related to the material can be found in other countries too. For example, in a study of some ESL classes in South Asia, Canagarajah (1993) found that the students felt alienated and negative towards the target language and culture which was due to the implicit western bias of the materials and the instructor, reinforced by the fact that the cultural context was never explicitly discussed. This was why the students felt anxious about and disconnected from the target language and culture. Generally speaking, “instead of leaving cultural goals unstated in the curriculum, as it is often the case, language curriculum designers may need to clearly articulate the cultural goals of each language course, so teachers and students can easily center on attaining the goals” (Tran, 2010, p. 33).

### 3. Culture and Language Teaching

Language is inevitably part of culture and teaching a language without talking about its culture means suffering from some missing points since as Mishan (2005) claimed, the nature of the culture-language relationship does not allow for their isolated study. Morozova (2014) also confirmed that cross-cultural component is essential for successful cross-cultural communication. She believed that socio-cultural knowledge solves the problem of mutual understanding and accurate interpretation of other nationalities since the national and cultural peculiarity of a language develops in the system of values, customs and traditions of a particular cultural community. The importance of teaching culture gets clearer when we find that according to Harmer (2007), when the learners cannot find an equivalent word or term for a foreign word in their society, it is not easy for them to properly understand the word. Kohls (1998) suggested that intercultural training can help learner become aware of how culture affects one’s perspective. Moreover, training can help learners to deal with the stresses experienced in cross-cultural encounters and overcome cultural obstacles (Brislin & Yoshida, 1994).

On the other hand, one of the benefits of education and specifically second/foreign language learning is acquiring tolerance toward other people and their cultural beliefs. This is the role of language teachers to guide the students to reflect on their own ethnic identities and facilitate them in honoring other cultures and developing positive cross-cultural relationships (Gay, 2000). According to Neuer (1994), Language learners usually deal with the target-language culture in the following aspects:

*Aesthetic aspect which covers arts, literature and music of the target-language; 2) Sociological aspect which embraces social institutions and traditions of the target-language country; 3) Semantic aspect which covers representations of the cognitive models in the target-language system; 4) Pragmatic aspect which detects the influence of certain cultural norms of the target language (p. 54).*

All of the above-mentioned areas can generate long discussions in language classrooms and the role of the teachers is so decisive in clarifying cultural differences to the students. Instead of just becoming the advertisers of the foreign language culture, teachers should emphasize that no culture is superior to another and language classroom is not a place for admiring foreign cultures. Generally speaking, while discussing, comparing and contrasting cultural values of native language and target language, the teachers should avoid praising intonation toward any of the cultures.

The methodology suggested by many scholars like Crawford-Lange & Lange (1984), Kramsch (1993), Seelye (1994), and Byram (1988) is congruent with Paige’s (2003) definition of culture learning and its three fundamental learning processes of 1) the learners’ exploration of their own culture; 2) discovery of the

relationship between language and culture, and 3) the learning of the heuristics for analyzing and comparing cultures. Teachers also need to add to their understanding of the target culture and as Valette (1986) maintained they should “set cultural goals which can be classified into four categories of (1) developing a greater awareness of and a broader knowledge about the target culture, (2) acquiring a command of the etiquette of the target culture, (3) understanding the differences between the target culture and the students’ culture, and (4) understanding the values of the target culture” (cited in Tran, 2010, p. 23).

#### **4. Major Cultural Constraint in Iranian Context**

Cultural values are considerably different in different countries and different areas of the world. There are fundamental differences between western and eastern cultures (Sheedy, 2011) and considering the close relationship between language learning and culture, there may be many cultural barriers for English language learners in many middle-east countries (Mahmood Hassan, 2014). Cultural constraints can be related to religious beliefs in many societies. In most eastern countries, religion plays a pivotal role in the life of individuals (Swan & Smith, 2001). Islamic codes, for example, specify restrictions in the relationships between men and women before they get married. Therefore, according to Mahmood Hassan (2014), while for a western student, the concepts of ‘boyfriend’ and ‘girlfriend’ are quite familiar; in middle-east countries such concepts are not culturally common. She also referred to some concepts like ‘gay marriage’ or ‘homosexuality’ that are hardly seen in eastern countries and may not be easy for a middle-eastern learner to find a context for. Moreover, drinking wine in different occasions and going to dance parties, so common in European countries, are not among the religious and social norms in many Islamic countries like Iran. There are also many other social norms like greeting other people with kiss (specifically among men and women) or men’s shaking hand with women that are religiously and socially unacceptable in Iran.

Differences in values and life styles among eastern and western countries make explanation of some concepts challenging to the language teachers. For example, while unmarried couples who live together for a long time and even have children can be commonly found in western societies, this type of relationship is legally forbidden and against the religious, social and cultural norms in Iran. Consequently, it seems that although language teachers have to explain culturally challenging terms and concepts in their classes, the young learners may have difficulty understanding them. On the other hand, many parents are not happy at all that the English classes make their children familiar with culturally forbidden concepts and express their deep concern about the interfering effects of the contradictory cultural values on the personal identity of their children. Many English teachers in Iran have the experience of dealing with dissatisfied parents who consider the teacher’s attempts to clarify cultural points of the target language as a kind of admiring western culture.

In their attempt to flourish their native culture and make children more and more familiar with it, many governments also find putting great focus on teaching foreign cultures threatening. Such concerns about the effects of foreign language culture are not restricted to Iran and some other countries like Saudi Arabia also hold similar views as well. These viewpoints are not even limited to Islamic countries and can be observed in the educational system of countries too.

#### **5. Cultural imperialism**

Kagan (1988) introduced three types of communication between cultures:

*a valuable and equal dialogue which leads to bilateral respect of the cultures in contact; (b) a utilitarian relation between cultures which can be observed when one of the cultures imposes its values and norms leading the other culture to unquestioned acceptance of the conventions of the first culture; and (c) a pseudo dialogue or a complete rejection of one culture by another (p. 97).*

The first model of communication among cultures is valuable and fruitful and in this context, L2 pedagogy, according to Mokhtarnia (2011), can be “a place for dialogue between cultures and conciliation between diverse

worldviews and identities” (p. 2001). However, the problem rises with the second and third types of communication among cultures, that are better to be called cultural imposition rather than cultural communication and it is in these cases that the mission of preserving and promoting local cultures achieves importance. Many governments take defensive position toward L2 culture and concepts like interaction and dialogue between cultures are replaced by linguistic imperialism, and cultural invasion.

Cultural imperialism is defined as the economic, technological and cultural hegemony of the industrialized nations, which try to define cultural values, and standardize the civilization and cultural environment throughout the world (Sarmela, 1975). Cultural imperialism is partly developed through the process of language learning.

In the process of language learning, the learners are continually organizing and reorganizing a sense of who they are and how they relate to the social world; therefore, the investment in the target language is also an investment in a learners’ own identity (Bourdieu, 1977). In the same regard, and exploring whether or not language may be value-free or independent of cultural background, Brown (1990) found that there are values and presuppositions about the nature of life and what is good and bad in any normal use of language and such normal language use is exactly what most L2 and FL instructors try to teach. As a consequence, the effect of learning a foreign language and its cultural values on the identity of the learners, specially adolescents whose personality is still developing, is clear and if the communication between cultures of the native language and foreign language is not based on respect and equality, a sense of resistance is created among the members of the presumed inferior culture. This may lead some of the governments to material censorship and creating some limitations in the field of education.

## 6. Guidelines for Teaching Culture

Brown (2007b) provided four guidelines for the language teachers to pay attention to cultural issues in their classrooms as follows:

*a student’s cultural identity is usually a deeply seated bundle of emotions; therefore, teachers should practice empathy as they relate to their students in cultural matters<sup>2</sup>. Teachers should recognize the cultural connotations and nuances of English and the first language of their students and capitalize those in their teaching<sup>3</sup>. Teachers should use the classroom as an opportunity to educate their students about other cultures and help them to see that no one culture is better than another. Teachers should also practice their respect for their students’ deeply ingrained emotions that stem from their cultural schemata. 4. When cultural differences emerge, teachers should help their students to appreciate diversity (p. 86).*

Foreign language acquisition and studying its culture can facilitate comprehension of one’s cultural, national and language identity and in this respect, a foreign language presents a new approach towards self-perception through the comparison of native and target-language cultures (Mikhaleva & Regnier, 2014). This is in compliance with “multiculturalism hypothesis” suggested by Berry (2006) which claims that “confidence in one’s identity will lead to sharing respect for others, and to the reduction of discriminatory attitudes” (p. 724).

Consequently, as it is quite clear, different approaches toward teaching culture first focus on improving the students’ understanding of their own culture and achieving confidence in their identities. Kramsch (1993) referred to two important points in studying culture in language learning as:

*Studying a culture is meant to be more than receiving information. It is important that the students analyze their native culture in its relation with the culture of the target language. Therefore, the process of studying target-language culture embraces studying the native culture of the students; 2) Studying a culture should be individualized and adapted to the students’ national and social identity, their age and origin.*

Presenting the material in accordance with the learners' age makes understanding cultural differences easier and reduces the need for censorship and exclusion of the cultural aspects of the foreign language which are contradictory to the social and cultural values of native community.

## 7. Conclusion

Isolation and censorship cannot be effective means to protect national culture. This is partly the job of the teachers and partly related to the governments' strategies to make the learners and specially the adolescents familiar with their native culture and help them to appreciate their cultural values and achieve confidence in their own identity. At the same time, teachers should focus on teaching cultural values of the target language with implying tone that no culture is superior to another and all people should respect other cultures. The cultural values are better to be presented to the learners considering their age, level of understanding and maturity to avoid misunderstanding and negative effects on their personal identity. This type of tactful and scheduled providing the learners with the cultural points of foreign language has not only no negative effect on their personality development, but as admitted by many researchers awareness of a foreign culture can contribute to understanding one's own culture and at the same time widen people's understanding of different cultures and worldviews.

## 8. References

- Berry, J. W. (2006). Mutual attitudes among immigrants and ethno-cultural groups in Canada. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*, 30, 719–734. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.ijintrel.2006.06.004>
- Bourdieu, P. (1977). The economics of linguistic exchanges. *Social Science Information*, 16, 645-68. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/053901847701600601>
- Brislin, R. W., & Yoshida, T. (1994). The content of cross-cultural training: An introduction. In R.W. Brislin & T. Yoshida (Eds.), *Improving intercultural interactions: Modules for cross-cultural training programs* (pp. 1–16). New Delhi: Sage Publications. <http://dx.doi.org/10.4135/9781452204857.n1>
- Brown, G. (1990). Cultural values: The interpretation of discourse. *ELT*, 1, 11-17. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1093/elt/44.1.11>
- Brown, H. D. (2007a). *Principles of language learning and teaching*. New York, NY: Pearson Education.
- Brown, H. D. (2007b). *Teaching by principles: An interactive approach to language pedagogy*. New York, NY: Pearson Education.
- Byram, M. (1988). Foreign language education and cultural studies. *Language, Culture, and Curriculum*, 1(1), 15-31. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/07908318809525025>
- Canagarajah, A. S. (1993). Critical ethnography of a Sri Lankan classroom: Ambiguities in student opposition to reproduction through ESOL. *TESOL Quarterly*, 27(4), 601-626. <http://dx.doi.org/10.2307/3587398>
- Crawford-Lange, L. M., & Lange, D. (1984). Doing the unthinkable in the second-language classroom: A process for integration of language and culture. In T. V. Higgs (Ed.), *Proficiency: The organizing principle* (pp. 139-177). The American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages, Foreign Language Education Series. Lincolnwood, IL: National Textbook.
- Gay, G. (2000). *Culturally responsive teaching: Theory, research, and practice*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Harmer, J. (2007). *How to teach English*. Essex: Pearson Education.
- Kagan, M. (1988). *A world of communication: The problem of interpersonal relations*. Moscow: Poltizat Press.
- Kohls, R. L. (1998). *The survival kit for overseas living*. Yarmouth, Maine: Intercultural Press.
- Kramsch, C. (1993). *Context and culture in language teaching*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Kramsch, C. (2003). Teaching language along the cultural fault line. In D. L. Lange & R. M. Paige (Eds.), *Culture as the core: Perspectives on culture in second language learning* (pp. 19–35). Greenwich, CT: Information Age Publishing Incorporated.
- Lindsay, P. (2000). *Teaching English worldwide*. Utah: Alta Book Centre.

- Mahmood Hassan, Z. (2014). Language contextualization and culture. *Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences* 136, 31–35. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.sbspro.2014.05.282>
- Mikhaleva, L. V., & Regnier, J. L. (2014). Parallel study of native and target-language cultures in foreign language teaching. *Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences*, 154, 118–121. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.sbspro.2014.10.122>
- Mishan, F. (2005). *Designing authenticity into language learning materials*. Intellect Books.
- Mokhtarnia, S. (2011). Language education in Iran: a dialogue between cultures or a clash of identities. *Procedia Social and Behavioral Sciences*, 15, 1998–2002. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.sbspro.2011.04.042>
- Morozova, T. (2014). Dialogue of cultures. In the system of teaching foreign languages: Modern imperative. *Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences*, 143, 152–156. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.sbspro.2014.07.378>
- Neuer, G. (1994). *The role of socio-cultural competence in foreign language teaching and learning*. Strasbourg: Council of Europe /Council for Cultural Co-operation, CC- LANG.
- Oxford Online Dictionary. (2013). Retrieved from <http://www.oxforddictionaries.com>
- Paige, R. M., & Stringer, D. (1997). *Training design for international and multicultural programs*. Portland, Oregon: Intercultural Communication Institute.
- Paige, R., Jorstad, H., Siaya, L., Klein, F., & Colby, J. (2003). Culture learning in language education: A review of the literature. Retrieved from <http://www.carla.umn.edu/culture/resources/litreview.pdf>
- Peterson, E., & Coltrane, B. (2003). Culture in second language teaching. ERIC Clearinghouse on Language and Linguistics. Retrieved from <http://www.cal.org/resources/digest/0309peterson.html>
- Richards, J. C., & Rogers, T. S. (2001). *Approaches and methods in language teaching*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511667305>
- Sarmela, M. (1975). Cultural imperialism. Retrieved from <http://www.kotikone.fi/matti.sarmela/indexEngl.html>
- Seelye, N. (1994). *Teaching culture: Strategies for intercultural communication* (3rd ed.). Lincolnwood, IL: National Textbook Company.
- Sheedy, J. (2011). Civilization differences – east and west. Retrieved from <http://www.drsheedy.com/civilizations-and-history/civilization-differenceseast-and-west.php>
- Swan, M., & Smith, B. (Eds.) (2001). *Learner English: A teacher's guide to interference and other problems* (2nd ed.). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511667121>
- Tran, H. T. (2010). *Teaching culture in the EFL/ESL classroom*. Paper presented at the Los Angeles Regional California Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages, Fullerton, California.
- Valette, R. M. (1986). The culture test. In J. M. Valdes (Ed.), *Culture bound* (pp. 179-197). New York, NY: Cambridge University Press.
- Zhang, X., & Yan, Y. (2006). Culture influences on English language teaching. *US-China Education Review*, 3(8), 72-77.

