

## ***Curriculum Modification via Culture-awareness Aspects in Education***

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### **Abstract**

In the field of language education four basic skills are essential in the process of teaching and learning. These are: reading, writing, listening and speaking. In many teaching methodology publications, these skills are integrated in one particular learning context. However, in the curriculum of many newly-formed countries in the Balkan Peninsula there is multicultural element that overshadows every learning/teaching material. Treating culture as a fifth skill widens the horizon of teaching. Introducing cultural contexts in educational curriculums might be interesting and thorny at the same time. Besides the literature review and research work conducted in Macedonia this paper provides a list of some well known teaching techniques and practices from the western world educational practices.

In the field of language education there are 4 basic skills that are essential in the process of teaching and learning. These are: reading, writing, listening and speaking. In many foreign languages teaching methodology publications, all these skills are integrated into one particular learning context. However, in many curriculums of the Balkan Peninsula although the reality is multicultural there is an element that shadows almost every learning/teaching material and that is the cultural aspect. Kramersch (1993) was among the first to argue that culture is the fifth skill in teaching. This skill is evident in every step of the process not only in language teaching but also in other fields of study/research. According to Omaggion (1993) teaching culture is considered important by most teachers but it has remained “insubstantial and sporadic in most language classrooms”.

This study aims to reflect on cultural and language aspect usage when teaching English with the intention of promoting and raising awareness on the cultural element in the educational curriculums that is evident and necessary in the teaching and learning process.

How is this context perceived in cultural studies?

Culture is an essential element in the formation of identity. It reflects a set of rules or behaviors that are common for a particular ethnic group or region. The importance of this element is also reflected in many societies as a competence that is necessary in

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all aspects of life and if handled properly, makes the educational process more efficient. According to Peterson and Coltrane(2003) the (American) National Center for Cultural Competence defines culture as an “integrated pattern of human behavior that includes thoughts, communications, languages, practices, beliefs, values, customs, courtesies, rituals, manners of interacting and roles, relationships and expected behaviors of a racial, ethnic, religious or social group; and the ability to transmit the above to succeeding generations” (cited from Goode, Sockalingam, Brown, & Jones, 2000).

Seeing it from an academic/teaching standpoint understanding, culture and cultural relativism creates a “healthy” ground to build up a culture sensitive perspective in education, which we may also refer to as multicultural education. In an attempt to clarify the meaning of multicultural education, Brian M. Bullivant (1977) broke the word ‘multicultural’ down in to its constituent parts: Multi- and cultural. Knowing the meaning of “multi” as “many”, his work aimed at defining culture in a multicultural education context. After analyzing several alternative meanings, Bullivant defined culture ”as a social group’s design for survival in and adaptation to its environment...” and with this definition in mind he added that one aim of multicultural education would be “to teach about the many social groups and their different designs for living in a pluralistic society”(cited in Davidman & Davidman, p.6).

In order to develop a more “culture-appropriate” focus it is desirable to develop content that can relate directly to the cultural norms of the host/mother tongue of the students but also the target/foreign language. This appears as a necessity since the largest publishers in Europe such as Oxford University Press, Cambridge University press and other publishers when designing foreign language books reflect cultural norms which are based on the needs-analyses of the largest consumers in the market such as India, China, Germany, Russia, without doing any analyses of the needs of the smaller markets. We cannot hold responsible the publishers for being interested in larger markets; however, we can as academics produce culturally-sensitive manuals that might bring closer the cultural content to the local context. This is the moment when culture becomes the fifth skill in English teaching besides reading, writing, listening and speaking in foreign language. Producing or adapting this kind of manual is not an easy process but it can be based on the experience and the literature review made at the second part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century when most of these concepts were explored.

If we want to focus more on the subject the first evidence can be gain through analyses of teaching materials used in classrooms.

#### *Teaching Culture and our Curriculum Reality*

When analyzing teaching materials used in teaching foreign language skills, we find cultural elements in two different forms:

1. Through specific texts promoting particular cultural phenomena or norm; or
2. Through “culture corners”.

Via the first form, students learn a particular cultural element in the reading section in which a particular text describes a specific context e.g.: wedding customs in Polynesia, dressing customs in Scotland. This approach raises cultural awareness and reflects the concept of “celebration through diversity” in which the different is seen as a value and not as an obstacle. However, it does not bring specific cultural norms to the class that might incorporate students from different cultures as participants/or members of the

community but just as readers/observers. We can say that similar limitations are present in the second form through “culture corners” that you find in some books. These “culture corners” bring interesting cultural information and provoke curiosity among students but do not necessarily get them in touch with their “local culture”. By “local culture” I mean an element that is a “real-life setting” for our student. Something that he/she can relate, compare and contrast with his/her culture or everyday life.

What our curriculum can take from a complex and not very balanced reality in South East Europe regarding the cultural awareness processes is the need to create a cultural awareness reality in which differences can be seen as an opportunity in mounting a new generation of culturally competent intellectuals. If this is introduced sensitively in our curriculum it would open a different view on the aspect of reflecting the other. By the other we mean rather the minority group (gender, sex, religion, etc) also, the second largest culture in the country (e.g. Albanians in Macedonia), or special needs students.

Ironically as in many political scenarios the solution is seen in the international factors. By international factor in education does not mean involvement of the international political elites but the foreign language classes in the educational process as a neutral territory in which cultural educational context can be developed more naturally. This new setting in the curriculum will not only focus on the foreign language culture but will also promote the values of the local cultures too.

Another common goal that rises naturally from this context is that the process of internationalization/euro-integration of the curriculum however the issue becomes a challenge when you have to implement this program, particularly in Language curricula.

Based on the above mentioned dilemma this study produced the following hypotheses:

1. Is a culturally sensitive teacher a must at any formal education program?
2. Although it is clear that Language and culture are interconnected, does teaching in context also mean teaching culture?
3. If one must choose between the target and the local culture, which culture is the most important in order to create an “anxiety free” but also efficient classroom experience?

As mentioned in the opening part in foreign language teaching methodology there are four basic skills in learning such as reading, writing, listening and speaking. What might be considered as an extra skill or as a fifth skill would be the culture awareness skill. This would be a skill taught through the English/foreign language curriculum.

## **The Research Methodology**

During the spring semester of 2012a research work was completed. It aimed at gaining first hand information regarding the presence of the cultural element from the teaching staff who teaches foreign in the Faculty of Languages, Cultures and Communication (LCC) and the Language Center (LC) at the South East European University (SEEU). Respondents were teaching staff of the English Language Department and the teaching staff of the Language Center. The process involved 22 teachers who answered the quantitative questionnaires and some interviews. The questionnaire can be found in Appendix 2.

The respondents were local teachers (Albanian and Macedonian) and International teaching staff (mostly native speakers of English). The cultural context in Macedonia

is quite complex. The majority of student population is Albanian, but there is also a considerable number of Macedonian, Turkish and Roma students. Although Albanian students are majority at SEEU they also speak the Macedonian and partially Turkish language. This is quite different from what the reality is in the country, where Macedonians are majority and their language is official but they don't often speak the language of other communities. In many cases at SEEU the so-called "three lingual flexible-language policy" creates an anxiety-free setting and sometimes English is seen as "neutral territory" in which students are expected to reflect more easily on educational and academic task since there is no tension in foreign language classes. This setting creates a safe surrounding to explore if the cultural element can increase learning efficiency. We also need to be aware that introducing inattentively cultural elements might present an obstacle in the process as well since all these developments are present at a territory that was the centre of the ethnic tension for decades and it culminated in year 2001.

In order to verify the abovementioned statements this research project aimed to:

- explore the presence of the cultural element in the foreign language curriculum materials,
- verify the awareness of the teaching staff when dealing with this set of issues and
- analyze needs analyses of the curriculum regarding the cultural elements in teaching.

## **Data interpretation**

Throughout the interviews almost all respondents saw language and culture as strongly related. It was stated by one of the respondents that language was usually the medium by which culture expresses itself, at least in three cases: 1) the speech of the people; 2) the articulations of national artists (poets, novelists, writers of revolutionary songs), and 3) the preservation of specific terms, words, or dialects that define a local group. In the cultural studies theory this would be the distinction between Culture and culture (capital letter "C" and small letter "c") in which the second case (the articulations of National artists) belongs to the "Capital C" in which the highest achievements of a particular community are highlighted. In cases 1 and 3 (the speech of the people and the preservation of specific terms, words, or dialects that define a local group) belong to "small c" in which the everyday life of people is reflected. For us as educators, the second category (small "c" culture) is very important since we want to impact positively on our students' everyday life through education and gaining knowledge through this aspect makes teaching more resourceful and we become more efficient.

When respondents were asked about the images that the teaching materials have for particular communities the respondents answers were that although the skills books were more frequently updated sometimes stereotypes are present. However, what seems to me make these books sometimes difficult to use in our local cultural context is that although the majority of them fight stereotypes they cannot provide a local examples since the Macedonian market is not a big consumer for this publisher.

These data analyses bring us naturally to the first conclusion. Since we cannot impact the publishing market, we can at least adapt the books with some local cultural context by a refined and balanced facilitation from the teachers. In order to make this process better structured, a Cultural awareness booklet could be produced that would include exercises, techniques and different practices from the cultural context that will bridge the ethnic,

cultural or other differences among students.

When asked about the extent to which the cultural context of teaching material helps in developing students' awareness of different linguistic means to express their attitudes the majority of respondents believe that this awareness is primarily metalinguistic, meaning that they already know the basic symbols and metaphors they encounter in the teaching material.

Regarding the extent to which the teaching material encourages comparisons of the foreign culture with the students' own culture—it is the overall impression of most of the interviewees that the teaching materials themselves don't really encourage a compare and contrast approach and it is often up to the teacher to develop or use comparisons with the local culture. It is the common position of almost all the interviewees that the majority reflect a multi-cultural context. Whilst the books do not actively provoke students to compare another culture to their own, naturally learning something about other peoples' practices or traditions initiates thought and discussion about that topic. Usually the teacher is the one that prompts the students to compare and contrast the characteristics of a different culture. Almost 65% of the respondents believed that dealing with sensitive issues such as freedom, human rights, religion, sexuality etc. is delicate. Although we believe that is more valuable and constructive to raise this issues then ignoring it teachers seem to be very cautious. These sorts of topics need also a well structured facilitation by the teacher and by facilitation, it does not necessarily mean classroom-management but also appropriate use of language. We have to be fully aware that appropriate language use is an important and delicate issue.

An important element that was present in one of my previous studies and is clearly evident here is the teachers' creativity, adaptability of the teaching material and the introduction of authentic materials. This is a factor that always adds points to any teaching context, particularly a teaching one. Defining authenticity is an issue that needs more clarification, and when course conveyers are language instructors from different age groups, with different teaching experiences and different native languages, their answers can lead to many ambiguities. These ambiguities get even more confusing when there is translation in the local languages.

Based on the remarks and data interpretation made earlier it is clear that promoting or seeing culture as the fifth skill in language classrooms are a logical medium to promote and ensure a multilingual and multicultural approach to teaching and research the values of every educational institution.

## **Conclusion**

Part of the arguments mentioned above might not be completely new ideas to us and their appropriateness also depends on a number of socio-linguistic factors that impact the culture awareness process extensively. At this stage, it is important to be aware that treating culture as the fifth skill widens the horizon of teaching foreign languages which might be interesting and thorny at the same time, however it is fair to conclude that:

- A teacher must always be culturally sensitive whilst presenting language that will be useful for the students.
- As a result of being part of a small publication market we are aware that we cannot impact the publishing market, however we can at least adapt the books

with some local cultural context through a refined and balanced facilitation from the teachers. In order to make this process better structured a “Culture Awareness Booklet/Manual” can be produced. This booklet could include exercises, techniques and different practices from the local cultural context that would bridge the ethnic differences among our students.

- Language and culture are interconnected but it is important to mention that teaching in context does not necessarily mean teaching culture. The teacher teaches in context in order to create a real-life situation for students’ comprehension but this context is not always culturally related. It is the role of the teacher to facilitate cautiously a setting in which equality and respects are evident.
- If one must choose between the target and the local culture, the most important element is the culture of the English learners. The foreign culture (be it English, Irish, German, French, etc.) should adapt to the host culture (that of the learner). This would increase the comprehension effectively and minimize stereotypes. Although teachers choose to ignore delicate issues it is obvious that sensitive issues should be structured and facilitated well but not ignored.
- Language and Culture coexist together in the process of teaching foreign languages, but in the classroom setting, no matter how hard the teacher tries, it is impossible to have a precise balance between them since the classroom environment is an artificial medium for teaching the particular culture. This is the moment when the teacher can bring examples from local culture and customs since they are not apparent in the teaching material.
- Promoting (formally/informally) culture as the fifth skill in language classrooms can verify that foreign languages classes are a logical medium to promote these values since foreign language classes are a “neutral territory” in which students should be relieved from any cultural anxiety. A number of these courses (including ESP) are a good setting since foreign languages are present almost in every curriculum and can have great impact.

A next stage for this research would be the actual design of a “Culture Awareness Booklet/Manual”. This would support the teaching staff in adapting the international teaching texts with some local norms and flavors in order to create a more realistic setting for the teaching goals but also promote cultural cohesion and understanding. The booklet would also have authentic materials from local newspapers, artistic publication, Pop-culture and significant examples that reflect mutual understanding among all ethnic groups in the region. A first step toward this goal is appendix 3. Based on the literature review regarding this issue, I gathered and interpreted some teaching techniques and methods that are reported as efficient in particular studies in the US and Europe and should be considered for class activities in our curriculums. The suggestions would help in providing some missing techniques, open a discussion regarding culture oriented topics and materials, and expect to increase the courage to discuss culturally sensitive issues in the majority of the multicultural classes in the Balkans peninsula.

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