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Unveiling the cultural dimensions in ELT: Implications and strategies

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Abstract

In recent years, the role of culture in English Language Teaching (ELT) has been more valued. When considering its significance, it becomes imperative to incorporate cultural components into the curriculum. The present article aims to explore how cultural differences impact ESL classrooms. It begins with an introduction that defines culture and discusses its relevance to language learning. Later, it explores cultural elements in art, literature, film, music, etc. and the potential for incorporating them into language instruction. Integrating cultural aspects into language teaching poses challenges. This essay alerts language instructors and provides suggestions for overcoming these challenges. Then, the benefits of cultural immersion in language instruction are discussed. Exposing students to different cultural aspects and practises is a substantial way of developing students' intercultural communicative competence (ICC). The learners can communicate effectively in multilingual and multicultural settings if given cultural awareness training. In a nutshell, this paper highlights the value of cultural elements in the English language classroom, hidden obstacles, strategies for overcoming them, and the proactive role of teachers in creating an inclusive learning environment for students from diverse cultural backgrounds.

Keywords: Integrating culture, English Language Teaching (LET), instruction, curriculum, intercultural understanding, and communication

Introduction

English language Teaching (ELT) is a complex and challenging process. Incorporating cultural elements into language instruction has gained much attention in recent years. When it comes to improving students' communicative competence in English, ELT has traditionally prioritised the instruction of grammar, vocabulary, and pronunciation. Byram and Morgan pointed out that there has been growing recognition, in recent years, of the importance of culture in language instruction and acquisition ^[1]. As teachers seek to offer practical ways of instruction to students from a wide range of backgrounds, there has been recent interest in studying the impact of culture on second language acquisition. As a result of its profound implications, cultural awareness is an essential component of language teaching (Cortazzi and Jin, 197). Hence, educators must better understand the cultural factors that affect language acquisition.

Integrating culture into ELT

According to Kramsch (quoted in Liu *et al.*, 2008) ^[10], culture is not a supplementary part of language instruction but an integral component. This statement emphasises the importance of cultural factors in the classroom. Lessons that include cultural elements can enrich students learning and broaden their perspectives. Teachers who want their students to develop linguistic competence may find this method helpful. Culture has significant implications for effective communication in the target language, which language students should be aware of. Hence, incorporating culture into ELT is essential. Teachers can help students learn the target language by paying attention to cultural aspects of their daily routines. While dealing with students from different cultural backgrounds, teachers can boost students' confidence and encourage them to use the target language more fluently in class.

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Defining ‘culture’ and its relationship to language teaching

Culture is a multifaceted notion that includes a variety of shared ideas, practises, conventions, values, behaviours, and items that characterise a specific group or community. It profoundly impacts learners’ perspectives, attitudes, and behaviours when acquiring a new language. As per Kramersch’s assertion, culture is not an additional component in language instruction; instead, it serves as a core medium through which language acquisition and meaning are conveyed (as cited in Kumaravadivelu, 58).

Language is more than just a system of rules for spoken and written exchange; it is an inherently cultural and social phenomenon. Byram states, “Language cannot be fully understood or used without knowledge of the cultural context”^[10]. Learners acquire language when exposed to the context in which it is spoken. In other words, culture and language are inseparable, and culture affects learners’ language acquisition.

Ways of integrating culture into ELT

Culture can be integrated into ELT in several different ways. Some of the most common methods for exposing students to the cultural background of a language are literature, film, music, and art. Here are some ways to integrate these cultural practices into English language teaching.

Literature is an excellent tool for integrating culture into ELT. It gives learners a glimpse into the values, beliefs, and customs of the target culture. According to Norton and Toohey, literature gives students cultural knowledge (207). Reading helps increase linguistic abilities and comprehension. Literature in ELT offers a fine cultural discovery. Students learn about many cultures through literary literature. Exposure to other cultures enhances respect for diversity and increases understanding between civilisations. Literary works teach students about language use in different cultures, which helps them improve their communication skills. Literature teaches linguistic structures, idioms, and vocabulary. This exposure improves their language and vocabulary.

Film is such a powerful medium that anyone can get immersed in it. It engages audiences and deepens cultural understanding. According to Kramersch, films provide a compelling insight into the target culture (qtd. in Kumaravadivelu 141). Cinema’s panoramic visuals let students know about cultural practices and language variations. Films are like visual texts that engage students in the language and culture they study. Film’s captivating plot, convincing dialogue, impressive visuals, and natural vernacular language use encourage students to study the language’s cultural differences. This enhances vocabulary, understanding, and language skills.

Music is the universal language of the soul. Davies and Elder believe music unifies cultures and helps students comprehend and empathise. Music articulates a culture’s values, beliefs, and peculiarities. Music fosters cross-cultural and linguistic communication. Music in ELT offers a diverse way to study culture. Music introduces students to the target culture’s musical genres and expressions. Melodies, rhythms, and lyrics stir emotions. This connects language learners to culture. Thus, music is not confined to enjoyment alone. It lets students practise authentic speech through song lyrics.

Art is another effective tool for infusing culture into ELT. Exploring the target culture’s art can reveal its history, values, and rituals. Byram claims that art helps us understand the world and express culture. Studying the target culture’s paintings, sculptures, literature, and architecture deepens the understanding of its history and culture. Immersing in the target culture’s art makes students comprehend its perspectives and improve their language skills. Art study boosts language development as well. Studying and evaluating the creative arts helps to employ language in real life. Art can be integrated into ELT through many exercises, like studying artworks, debates on their historical and cultural value, aesthetic value, etc.

In this way, ELT can be incorporated into culture in several ways. Teachers can enrich their students’ learning experiences and provide them with the skills and knowledge to communicate effectively in various cultural settings by embracing the language’s cultural context. This strategy may improve learning by engaging students and enhancing comprehension.

Benefits of cultural integration

Students can significantly be benefitted from incorporating cultural aspects into their language studies. Since language is both a means of communication and an expression of one’s cultural values, norms and practises, it is unsurprising that the two are inextricably related. There are numerous advantages to incorporating culture into ELT.

First, students can learn how to communicate effectively in the real world by being exposed to different cultures. Kramersch opines that language and culture are inextricably linked. For effective communication, it is essential to understand the setting in which a given language is used^[5]. Through interaction with people from other cultural backgrounds, learners develop their communicative abilities effectively. This enhances students’ intercultural communicative competence (ICC).

Secondly, students take an interest in and feel motivated when they learn a language in a relevant context (McKay 1). Kanno and Norton found that students exposed to cultural materials in the classroom were more engaged and enthusiastic about learning the language (245). By incorporating cultural elements into classes, teachers can make foreign language learning more meaningful and exciting for their students.

Thirdly, it enables one to become more open-minded and accepting of people from different backgrounds. Kramersch states, “Learning a language means learning a new way of experiencing the world” (qtd in Kumaravadivelu 59). Teaching English as a second language in a culturally sensitive manner has increased students’ intercultural awareness and capacity to appreciate and empathise with people of other backgrounds (Holliday 15). Thus, the above discussion shows how students might benefit from cultural integration into ELT.

Challenges and Limitations

Although incorporating cultural elements into ELT has benefits, it also has drawbacks. Misunderstandings between cultures constitute a significant challenge to overcome. Disparities in communication and understanding are possible because of cultural differences in language use and comprehension (Kubota 100). Without exposure to a language’s cultural milieu, students cannot grasp the

significance of customs and their celebrations. Another challenge in integrating culture into ELT is the risk of perpetuating stereotypes. It is difficult to avoid making assumptions based on superficial knowledge about a person's background or culture (Holliday 12). A teacher tries to simplify things during teaching for the students' better understanding. According to Tomlinson, using oversimplified or stereotypical images of culture might lead to the spread of false information or the potential for offence.

Time constraints are another barrier to incorporating culture into ELT. Due to time and resource constraints, cultural instruction in language programmes can be challenging (Kumaravadivelu, 143). Due to limited time, teachers may struggle to deeply explore cultural aspects like history, customs, traditions, and social norms. Thus, learners may not fully know the target culture due to its superficial nature. Lack of authenticity is also a big challenge. It hampers learners' capacity to understand the target culture and interact effectively. Kramersch claims that language teaching materials and textbooks often present a sanitised and idealised image of the target culture, which may fail to capture its true nature (qtd in Kumaravadivelu 143). Cultural materials that either lack contextual accuracy or fail to reflect societal values can foster misunderstandings and misinterpretations of a culture.

Strategies to address challenges

To overcome the difficulties, language teachers need to develop specific strategies. They must undergo training to cultivate cultural awareness to prevent potential misunderstandings. Kumaravadivelu proposes that to avoid such misinterpretations, educators must familiarise themselves with the cultural background of their students and incorporate it into the language learning environment (147). To support this view, Byram states, "Language teachers need to be aware of cultural differences and their impact on language learning and teaching" (73).

To address the inauthenticity problem, Kramersch suggests, "Teachers need to provide students with a rich and diverse range of cultural materials that represent the target culture" (qtd. in Kumaravadivelu 143). The resources utilised in the classroom can be integrated with students' cultural backgrounds. Integrating authentic cultural materials that match the learners' cultural experiences can enhance their engagement and relevance. Additionally, it can facilitate the exchange of cultural perspectives among learners. Additionally, educators may integrate experiential learning methodologies, such as excursions, cultural festivities, and engagements with indigenous individuals, to offer students a genuine cultural immersion.

While suggesting an easy solution to the problem of limited time, Byram states, "Integrating culture into the language curriculum can help to avoid the problem of insufficient time for cultural learning" (73). Incorporating cultural elements into language learning activities, such as role-playing, problem-solving, and group discussions, can offer students a comprehensive learning experience.

The implementation of such strategies can establish a learning environment that is culturally diverse, inclusive, and responsive. This environment would recognise and honour the diversity of learners. In addition, displaying a sincere curiosity about the cultural backgrounds of learners can aid in fostering more robust relationships with them.

Ultimately, incorporating culturally relevant and significant learning materials can optimise the learning experience by enabling a deeper connection between the learners and the subject matter.

Role of language teachers

The above argument shows that language instructors are vital to incorporating culture into ELT. Kumaravadivelu suggests that "the teacher plays a central role in shaping the learning experiences of students and in determining the success of the cultural component of language learning" (147). Teachers substantially contribute to developing students' cultural sensitivity and awareness by exposing them to authentic cultural materials, incorporating culture into language lessons, and fostering critical thinking.

Conclusion

This article concludes that culture is pivotal in English language teaching and learning. It underlines the importance of incorporating cultural components into the curriculum and practice of ELT and also scrutinises the obstacles that emerge while integrating cultural elements into the ELT syllabus. The article posits that incorporating culture should be duly acknowledged and considered within the domain of English language instruction. In conclusion, the essay shows that a culturally sensitive pedagogical approach can increase student engagement and motivation, ultimately improving language learning outcomes. Individuals who engage in language acquisition can also enhance their intercultural communicative competence, enhancing their communication ability in diverse and multilingual settings. The findings suggest incorporating culture into ELT can enhance linguistic competencies and foster cross-cultural understanding.

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