



Beyond “Pancakes for Breakfast”— Assessing Cultural Awareness in the EFL Classroom

Ana Albuquerque

Universidade Católica Portuguesa, CECC, Research Centre for Communication and Culture, Portugal

Abstract

Culture is an inseparable part of language and has always played a role in the EFL classroom, however, perspectives on how to deal with the cultural aspects of the foreign language differ among teachers and researchers. On the other hand, in the globalized internet world we live in today, further issues arise concerning which aspects of culture should be brought into the classroom to enhance students' awareness of the anglophone cultures they may engage with in their professional and personal lives. Drawing from Hymes' notion of communicative competence (1972) and Moran's "five elements of culture" (2001), the study focuses on the notion that, although embedded in language, the teaching of the target culture requires explicit approaches and teaching strategies, which should go beyond the surface-level information about "pancakes for breakfast" or "talking about the weather." According to Gonzalez (2018): "Moran explains that culture learning outcomes can be varied and can tackle different learner's needs," however teachers are not always aware of such needs or how to address them in class. Ultimately aiming at clarifying the purpose of incorporating culture into language instruction in the current globalized world, the study uses questionnaires to analyze teachers and learners' perspectives of culture in EFL teaching and learning in the era of globalization. The survey will be administered to a small community of teachers and students at a higher education institution and, hopefully, it will bring light into how the teaching of culture should integrate EFL courses and syllabi in the future.

Key Words: *cultural awareness, globalization, communicative competence, language and culture, EFL*

1. Introduction

Although culture is interconnected with language, and has always played a role in the English as a Foreign Language Classroom (EFL), the perspectives on how to deal with the cultural aspects of the foreign language are very different among teachers, researchers and, most naturally, also among the students themselves.

The belief that language and culture are inseparable derives from the understanding that language embodies cultural values and practices and, therefore, by learning a language, learners gain insights into the customs, beliefs and habits of the people who use that language. However, the question arises as to how much explicit attention should be given to culture within the language classroom (Gonzalez, 2018).

Some EFL teachers assume that cultural learning occurs naturally as part of language instruction. However, research and scholars like Kumaravadivelu (2003) argue that the "complexity of culture itself" is inevitably added to "the complexity of language teaching," and this added complexity makes the whole teaching and learning process an even more challenging endeavour for teachers and EFL materials designers.

As an example, considering the inclusion of pancakes for breakfast in the USA or talking about the weather in the UK as common elements within EFL instructional materials, we need to ask ourselves how representative such features of these English-speaking cultures are, and how accurately they reflect the broader cultural practices of English-speaking countries in today's globalized world.

We also need to contemplate the extent to which such features help us to foster the "stubborn persistence of cultural stereotypes in the TESOL profession, despite a growing body of useful literature on teaching culture," as pointed out by Kumaravadivelu (2003: 715).

For foreign language teaching, which aims to facilitate meaningful communication in real-life contexts based on the perspective of "communicative competence," a notion introduced by Hymes in 1972, which has influenced the communicative approach in language teaching and emphasizes the functional and social aspects of language use, it would be important for educators to expose learners



to diverse authentic cultural contexts. In addition, within the interconnected English-speaking panorama of today, they should also challenge stereotypes, and not perpetuate them as suggested by Kumaravadivelu (2003), and promote intercultural competence.

How, in practice, should teachers and curriculum designers address cultural issues in contemporary EFL classes is the main question. In Portugal, the teaching of culture is often considered implicit and not overtly included in the EFL curriculum. Therefore, this study aims to analyse the perspectives of students and learners regarding the teaching of culture in the EFL classroom within a Portuguese higher education institution. To achieve this end, the following research questions were formulated:

- Are the teaching of language and the teaching of culture inseparable?
- Is it possible to learn a language without learning about its culture, and to learn about a culture without learning the language?
- Should the teaching of culture integrate EFL courses and syllabi? How?
- In the globalized internet world we live in today, which aspects of culture should be brought into the classroom to enhance students' awareness of the anglophone cultures they may engage with in their professional and personal lives?

2. Literature Review

Various authors offer diverse perspectives on the topic. Brown (2007: 187, cited in Dema *et al*, 2012: 76) argues that language and culture are inseparable, asserting that acquiring a second language, also entails acquiring a second culture, except in cases of specialized or instrumental acquisition. On the other hand, Chong (2006) suggests that for many EFL learners, English serves primarily as a tool of communication rather than a means to explore English culture and literary traditions.

According to Kramsch (1993: 1), for example, culture should not be treated as an optional additional "fifth skill" in language teaching. It should not be viewed as something separate from the development of speaking, listening, reading and writing. Instead, the author says that culture is an integral part of language learning "right from day one". Furthermore, in the case of "good language learners," Kramsh affirms that cultural issues can "unsettle" them "when they expect it least," by revealing the limitations of their acquired communicative competence and, consequently, challenge their abilities and stimulate them to acquire more knowledge.

On the other hand, authors like Décuré (2022) defend that "talking about the culture in the target language is not learning the cultural component of the language," in the same way that learning about culture does not "have to be done in the target language." According to the author, because learning about culture is specialized knowledge, it should be done in specific Culture Studies classes.

In Kramsch's view, however, the "dicothomy between language and culture is an entrenched feature of language teaching around the world." He agrees that, in many cases, culture is perceived merely as information conveyed through language, rather than an inherent aspect of the language itself and, consequently, "cultural awareness becomes an educational objective in itself, separate from language." However, the author's view is that language should be seen as social practice, and, if so, culture becomes integral to language teaching. In this perspective, cultural awareness is not only instrumental in developing language proficiency, but is also the "outcome of reflection on language proficiency" (Kramsch, 1993: 8).

In his book "Teaching Culture: Perspectives in Practice" (2001), Patrick Moran explores how to teach culture in the context of language teaching and offers various perspectives and approaches to incorporating culture into language teaching practices. Expanding on Edward Hall's, the prominent anthropologist, theoretical construct of the 3 Ps (Products, Practices and Perspectives) — the three-dimensional construct to understand and analyse cultural phenomena in general — Moran proposes "five elements of culture" (known as the "iceberg model") that are relevant to language teaching: products, practices, perspectives, processes and participants.

Moran's model offers an advantage by expanding the dimensions from three to five, thus creating distinct content areas. This clarity aids in identifying the content of cultural experiences that teachers present to learners. Each of the five dimensions is linked to language, and, as students' proficiency develops, they should be able to use the language in accordance with the four language functions: participating in the culture, describing the culture, interpreting the culture and responding to the culture (Gonzalez, 2018).

It is my view that combining Kramsch's perspective on language as social practice with Morans's teaching perspectives on culture presents a promising approach. This combined approach has the potential to foster intercultural understanding, challenge stereotypes and cultivate a deeper understanding of the diverse cultures within the English-speaking world. By recognizing language as



social practice, and integrating cultural elements into EFL teaching, educators can probably create a learning environment that encourages meaningful cultural exploration while promoting a deeper understanding of different societies and their languages. It is the teachers and material designers task to analyse how this perspective would work in practice. This preliminary study aims to shed light on the matter by investigating the students' and teachers' perspectives on the integration of cultural awareness in EFL classes.

Context of the Study

English as foreign language plays an important role at the Faculty of Human Sciences at Universidade Católica Portuguesa, where it is taught as core subject in various undergraduate programs. Students from two of these courses: Communication and Cultural Sciences and Applied Linguistics were invited to participate in the study.

The Communication and Cultural Sciences degree offers four levels of EFL courses. These courses target proficiency levels ranging from B2 to C1+ levels. Each course is worth 3,5 ECTS credits and includes 42 classroom hours per semester. The survey was conducted during the Summer semester of 2022/23 among students enrolled in the English II and English IV courses.

The Applied Foreign Languages degree comprises 6 levels of EFL courses, which aim to develop proficiency levels from B2 to C2. Each course is worth 5 ECTS credits and involves 63 classroom hours per semester. The survey was conducted in the Summer semester of 2022/23 among students enrolled in the English II course.

The syllabi for English II and IV in the Communication and Cultural Sciences cover various current affairs topics, including war reporting, digital and social media, filter bubbles, objectivity in journalism, censorship and ethics, and war propaganda. These programs delve into the impact of modern media technology on society, social justice and cultural diversity.

In contrast, the English II program in the Applied Foreign Languages degree explores language and culture through the study of literary and informational texts. It covers themes such as English as a global language, the story of English, multilingualism and cultural awareness and identity. Consequently, students in both undergraduate programs benefit from a comprehensive understanding of English as a foreign language and its relationship with various aspects of society and culture. For this reason, they were invited to participate in the study. The survey link was posted on the Moodle platform and 92 students participated in the study.

Additionally, the perspective of teachers was obtained by administering a survey to the five EFL teachers who taught the classes involved in the study.

3. Results

The study is based on the two questionnaires which focus was to identify how students and teachers identify the aspects of culture that are most valued in the context of English as a foreign language classes. The surveys consisted of ten Likert type items and were conducted anonymously.

Table 1. Students' Survey Results

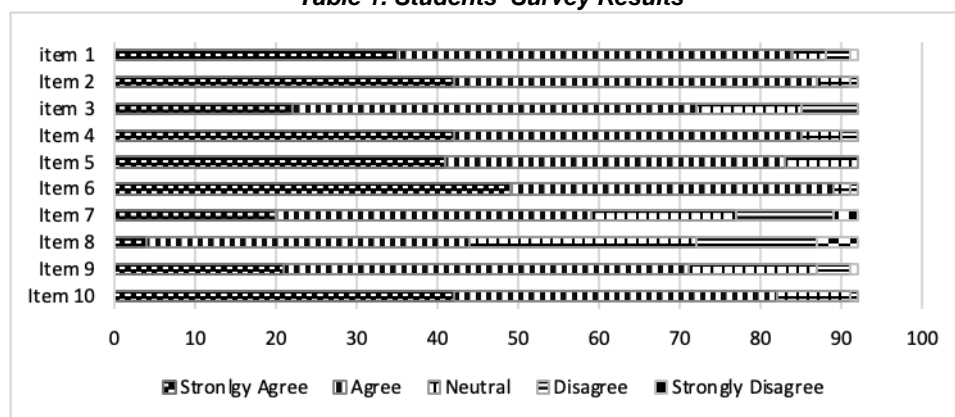


Table 1 presents a summary of the results obtained from the responses of the 92 respondents, while table 2 displays the results of the answers provided by the 5 teachers who took part in the study. The answers to the first item of the survey reveal that most students consider that learning about culture is essential to learning a language, as 38% of the students agree and 53,3% strongly agree with this item. However, a small percentage of 8,7% either disagree or are indecisive about the issue.



Most students also either agree or strongly agree that cultural aspects like formal and informal greeting and habits should be taught in class so as to avoid cross-cultural misunderstandings, and the majority, 78,2%, also either agrees or strongly agrees that foreign culture learning should be taught explicitly and in detail in the EFL classroom, although 21,8% are either indecisive or disagree that this teaching should take place in the EFL classroom.

Almost all respondents, 92,4%, either agree or strongly agree that learning a foreign language helps them more aware of cultural differences between countries and the majority also either agrees or strongly agrees that cultural awareness makes them more tolerant of other cultures.

The large majority of students, 96,8%, also either agrees or strongly agrees that the best way to learn about culture is to travel. Only one student disagrees that travelling is the best way to learn about culture, while two students are indecisive.

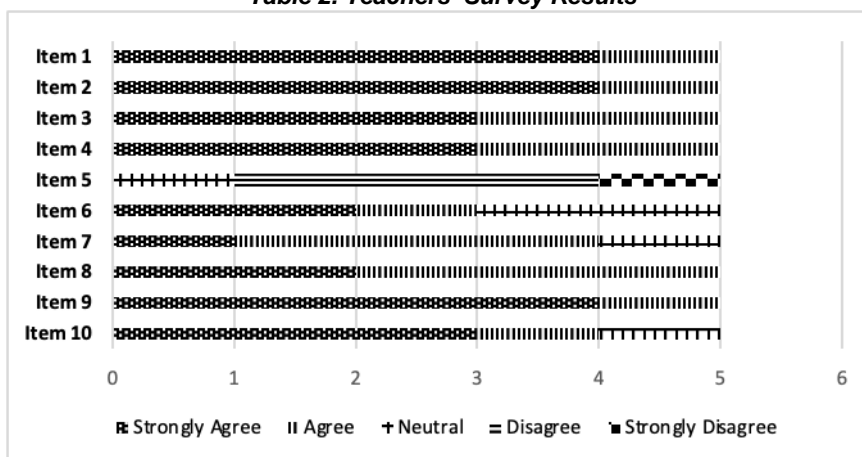
Although 19,6% of the students are indecisive about whether they learn more about English speaking countries' cultures on the internet than in English classes and 16,3% actually either disagree or strongly disagree that they do, 64,1% trust that they get most of their knowledge about English culture from the internet, as they either agree or strongly agree with this item.

On the other hand, students are divided on whether they got most of their knowledge of English speaking countries cultures from EFL classes, because although 47,8% say that they agree or strongly agree with this item, 30,4% are indecisive and 21,8% either disagree or strongly disagree.

Concerning whether learning about the cultures of English speaking countries helps students learn more about the English language, the majority of students consider that it does, as 77,1% either strongly agree or agree with the item, while 17,4% are indecisive and a small percentage of 5,5% either disagrees or strongly disagrees.

The last item of the survey inquired about whether the students thought that cultural aspects such as arts, literature, music and cinema should be part of the English language classroom. Although the majority of 89,2% either agree or strongly agree that such cultural aspects should integrate EFL classes, nine students are indecisive and 1 student strongly disagrees that such items should be part of the EFL classes syllabi.

Table 2. Teachers' Survey Results



Generally speaking, the results of the teachers' survey reveal that the teachers' perspectives on how to integrate cultural topics in the EFL classroom are in alignment with the students' survey results. Like the students, all the teachers either agree or strongly agree that culture plays an important role in language teaching. Moreover, they trust that the study of culture can enhance student's motivation to learn the foreign language.

Four teachers also strongly agree, and one teacher agrees with Galisson's (1990) notion that "language and culture are naturally bound up with each other, and trying to separate them is artificial." They either agree or strongly agree that combining language and culture actually helps learners improve their language skills.

Like the students, the teachers also either agree or strongly agree that cultural aspects like formal and informal greetings and habits should be taught in the EFL class so as to avoid cross-cultural misunderstandings when students meet English speaking foreigners. However, contrary to students' opinions, teachers are divided on whether the cultural dimension in English as a foreign and culture



should be taught clearly and explicitly in the EFL classroom. While two teachers strongly agree and one teacher agrees with this perspective, two other teachers are indecisive.

Most teachers also either disagree or strongly disagree that studying culture in the foreign language is unnecessary in a context where English will be used mostly as a tool of communication, although one teacher is indecisive about this matter. However, just as most students, the majority of teachers also either agree or strongly agree that cultural awareness makes students more tolerant of other cultures. One teacher is indecisive about this matter, though.

Three teachers agree and one teacher strongly agrees that an English EFL syllabus should cover English-speaking countries' cultures other than the British and American, although one teacher is indecisive about this matter.

In alignment with the students' views, four teachers strongly agree and one teacher agrees that cultural aspects such as arts, literature, music and cinema should always be part of the English language classroom.

Overall, from the survey analysis, it can be observed that, while there are some areas where students and teachers have differing opinions or indecisiveness, their perspectives align on the significance of culture in language learning and on the integration of cultural aspects in the EFL classroom. It is also significant to note that both students and teachers recognize that cultural knowledge enhances language learning, and that by learning a foreign language students become more aware of cultural differences and more tolerant towards other cultures.

4. Final Consideration

The results presented by this study are expected to contribute to a deeper comprehension of the current approach to teaching culture in English language teaching in context of the tertiary institution under study. The teachers were explicitly informed that the results would be shared, as the purpose of the research was to facilitate a reflection on how cultural issues should be addressed within English as a foreign language classes.

Furthermore, the findings also aim to assist in making the approach to culture in EFL teaching more explicit rather than implicit. By shedding light on the current practice, the study intends to provide valuable insights that can lead to a clearer and more deliberate integration of cultural aspects into EFL classes in order to enhance students' understanding and appreciation of the target language and its cultural contexts.

Ultimately, the study intends to draw implications that can enhance the quality of EFL teaching not only in the specific context under study, but also in other similar contexts.

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