

# The Relationship of Language and Culture in ESP

Dr. Smaine Khalki  
Université Tahri Mohamed Béchir

## Abstract

The Present article explores the relationship between language and culture by defining the concept of culture as a significant component to incorporate in the process of teaching and learning the English language, namely in an ESP (English for Specific Purposes) situation. Such relationship between language and culture raises attention to learning culture through language teaching. It shows in general the correlation between language and culture, the significance of integrating culture in foreign language teaching in ESP classroom and its role in communication.

**Key words:** language, ESP, culture, Teaching, learning, students

## Résumé

Le présent article explore la relation entre la langue et la culture en définissant le concept de la culture comme un élément important à intégrer dans le processus d'enseignement et d'apprentissage de la langue anglaise, à savoir dans une situation ESP (Anglais pour des fins spécifiques ou langue de spécialité). Une telle relation entre la langue et la culture attire l'attention sur l'apprentissage de la culture à travers l'enseignement des langues. Il montre en général la corrélation entre la langue et la culture, l'importance de l'intégration de la culture dans l'enseignement des langues étrangères dans les classes ESP et son rôle dans la communication.

**Mots-clés :** langue, ESP, culture, enseignement, apprentissage, étudiants

## **Introduction**

Culture and language are two wide and complex notions, to which various definitions have been assigned. It is convenient, for the purpose and the context of this article, to explain culture in its relation to language teaching and learning. It is assumed that language and culture are interwoven and cannot be separated from each other, one being part of the other. Language is used to maintain and convey culture and cultural ties. Richard Swiderski believes that:

*Whatever presence culture may have in the language classroom, those who enter the classroom expect culture. They have explicit expectations, expressed perhaps as a wish to learn about the ways and lives of the people who speak the language to be learned, or as a need to know how to behave and how not to behave while among these people. Students expect to receive this information, and teachers expect to teach it. This is the outright cultural act of language teaching/learning set within the cultural environment of the classroom.<sup>1</sup>*

The teaching of English for Specific Purposes (ESP) has been generally seen as divorced from cultural input. However, it has been demonstrated recently that the cultural aspect has its significance since ESP is a branch of ELT. This contribution argues that cultural information is a necessary component of any ESP course, but that the teaching methods used must take into account the complex nature of culture as well as students' needs.

### **1. Foreign Language Teaching and Culture**

The significance of incorporating culture in FL teaching has been usually upheld as a supplement to improve the learning process. Culture is considered as a crucial component provided in the textbook and presented by the language teacher. Although culture is integrated in different teaching materials, people's unawareness lead culture to have an isolated position or

<sup>1</sup> Richard Swiderski, *Teaching Language, Learning Culture*, Bergin & Garvey, 1993, p. 19

little importance in language teaching and learning.<sup>2</sup>

Recent models of language teaching have attempted to put more emphasis on the behavioural aspects of culture and their part in communication<sup>3</sup> and that it is only recently that the concept of culture has become up to date in language teaching. At present, the necessity for learning about culture is widely recognised, as experience revealed that it is inadequate to teach the language only in itself. Foreign language teaching requires the devotion to linguistic skills but more attention should be paid to wider concerns.

According to Kramsch culture is always in the language learning process but it should not be considered as a fifth skill,<sup>4</sup> i.e. teaching a language requires teaching the four language skills by incorporating culture in each skill (speaking, writing, listening, and reading). If language is considered as social practice, then culture should become the core of language teaching to the point that cultural awareness should be seen as enabling language proficiency.<sup>5</sup> It is, then, evident that culture takes an important part in language learning process.

## **2. Objectives of Teaching Culture in ESP**

The purposes of teaching culture in an ESP course are diverse and vary according to the context of teaching and learning. Nevertheless, the aims below may be considered of sufficient relevance in the context of ESP and may be used as a source for developing a culture syllabus. In this respect, Mohamed Ouakrime states the following aims among which:

---

<sup>2</sup> M. Byram and M. Fleming, *Language Learning in Intercultural Perspective: Approaches through Drama and Ethnography*, Cambridge University Press, 1998, pp. 147-157.

<sup>3</sup> Morgan, Carol, "Teaching 'Culture' at A-level" in *Language Learning Journal*. No.7, 1993, pp. 42-44.

<sup>4</sup> Kramsch, C., *Context and Culture in Language Teaching*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993, p. 8

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.,

- *To understand the forms of organizations, concepts, customary beliefs and patterns of behaviour of members of the target culture community.*
- *To acquire enough knowledge and understanding of the target culture with the purpose of developing a tolerant attitude towards its community.*
- *To develop an awareness of the differences and similarities existing between cultures and their implications.*
- *To be able to behave linguistically and non-linguistically in such a way that one's intended meanings are understood by members of the target language and culture community.*
- *To use cultural awareness as a fostering factor for developing communicative competence in the target language.*<sup>6</sup>

### **3. Importance of Culture in ESP**

According to McKay, teaching, regardless of the relationship between language and culture, different views arise concerning the integration of culture. Some find that the acquisition of language requires an understanding of culture while others look at the cultural content as only a motivating process for students; therefore, "It can be questioned whether the teaching of culture is necessary to integrate in teaching English, which has become the international language".<sup>7</sup> However, some scholars claim that teaching an international language does not need an integration of culture. Gonzalez, for instance, maintains that in the teaching of English as an International Auxiliary Language (EIAL), "English is deracinated or uprooted from its original cultural soil; only special registers of science and technology, business and geopolitics are used", he enhances "teaching EIAL is nothing more than teaching English for specific purposes (ESP)".<sup>8</sup>

<sup>6</sup> Ouakrime, Mohamed, *Formal and Deep Culture for E.F.L Students: A Course Proposal*, Faculty of Letters, Sidi Mohammed Ben Abdallah University, Fés, 1992,

<sup>7</sup> McKay, L.S., *Teaching English as an International language*, Oxford University Press, 2002, p. 86

<sup>8</sup> Gonzalez, A., *The Cultural Content in English as an International Auxiliary language (EIAL): Problems and issues in Tickoo, M. L. (ed.): Language and Culture in Multilingual societies*. Singapore: SEAMEO Regional Language Centre, 1995, p. 54-63.

So globalization requires people to learn EIAL to fit their needs, the ability of using the language appropriately permits to individuals to communicate easily and achieve communicative goals. From this opinion, it is taken for granted that the individual learns English only for specific purposes such as technology, science, biology, or business, and no need to know the cultural side of the language; thus, only specific registers achieve the individual's communicative goal for some. Others find that, to reach effective communicative goal whether the individual is learning English for specific purposes (ESP) or for other purposes, learners need to fit their needs; therefore, using the language requires both learning the language and its culture.

Such an idea means that the cultural values are present in the use of the language by individuals. The integration of culture when using the language seems to be an essential component, McKay presents an example about scientific writing which deals with cultural assumptions and presuppositions. For instance, the nature of objectivity, the importance of truthfulness in scientific endeavours and what is appropriate to include or exclude in a scientific report.<sup>9</sup> Therefore, it is assumed that the English language used and the field chosen by individuals need cultural knowledge that fits their requirements in an ESP context. Along this line, Valdes states, "it is virtually impossible to teach a language without teaching cultural content".<sup>10</sup>

McKay maintains that culture is essential in a way that students learning English for specific purposes need to be aware of the culture related to a particular discourse that suits their studies and the goal to reach when using the language.<sup>11</sup> In the same vein, Brown maintains that culture is necessary

---

<sup>9</sup> McKay, L.S., op. cit, p. 85.

<sup>10</sup> Valdes, Joyce Merrill, *Culture Bound, Bridging the Cultural Gap in Language Teaching*, Cambridge University Press, 1986, p. 121.

<sup>11</sup> McKay, L.S., op. cit., p. 88

because “it is really an integral part of the interaction between language and thought Cultural patterns, customs, and ways of life are expressed in language; culture- specific world views are reflected in language”.<sup>12</sup> In knowledge society, the content of the studies, the methods used, and the requirements for a teacher’s experience are changing. The exchange of information does not take place only in a single country but a worldwide. International cooperation between countries in the fields of tourism, business, culture, and education is developing.

In this respect, Robertson considers that

*“in knowledge society, the aim of education is not only to educate professionals for a certain field, but it has to help students to be aware of cultural values, from human mutual relationship, collaborate, be open, adapt to the new situation, creativity express their ideas, accept responsibility and challenge”.*<sup>13</sup>

#### **4. Including Culture in ESP Teaching**

Many scholars maintain that cultural content in EFL textbooks should be presented in an approach to interest and motivate students to learn other cultures, otherwise, it decreases their motivation<sup>14</sup>. This also affects negatively the way students look at other countries’ culture, because of students are discourage to gain cultural knowledge. Thus, he confirms that adequate teaching materials supplemented by fitting cultural content and good training on the way culture is presented increase learners’ motivation toward and awareness of the target culture. It seems that students’ low motivation decreases their interest in learning the language in EFL/ESP classroom.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>12</sup> Brown, H. Douglas. *Principles of language learning and teaching*, New York, 4th ed., U.S, 2000, 198.

<sup>13</sup> Robertson, Susan L., *Re-imagining and Rescripting the future of education: global knowledge economy discourses and the challenge to education systems*. Comparative Education, 2005, 41 (2), 151-170.

<sup>14</sup> McKay, L.S., op. cit., p. 87

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.,

In this respect, McKay argues that when “both the material we use and the way we use it are culturally alienating then, inevitably, the students switch off, retreat into their inner world, to defend their own integrity”.<sup>16</sup> The relationship between students’ motivation and the way cultural data is presented is also focused. This affects language learning positively or negatively. Therefore, teachers need first to make them appreciate a foreign culture and cultural appreciation comes when the students understand a foreign culture and expectantly feel comfortable with it to achieve cultural competence.

In ESP classes, culture is a very significant element in combination with the specific vocabulary students usually acquire. Teachers should take into account the fact that their students have already studied language for several years; thus, they have the necessary linguistic skills to understand language. The task to intersperse culture into the English classes becomes easier for the ESP teachers since they can present culture through the specific vocabulary or expressions students need to acquire. Teachers may bring to classes texts presenting different cultural aspects closely related to the students’ future specialization; he or she may use visual materials bringing out important cultural facts, newspapers or magazines from that country with both cultural and factual content. Debates or role-plays should not be left out since they symbolise a great occasion for students to express their views as well as to imagine how it feels to be “in the skin of a foreigner”.

Damen believed that the presentation of a critical incident in which some problems occur among people from different cultures is another important approach when teaching culture. Students take into consideration that specific situation and people’s reactions and comment on the cultural values represented by the actions of each. “Their objective is to reach a

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.,

consensus on a course of action that would have been more appropriate in that particular situation”.<sup>17</sup>

Culture is present in all ESP classes no matter what the students' specializations are: economics, sociology, tourism, or business. Culture being closely linked to language and its use, it allows foreign language learners to communicate successfully and proficiently.

Students in economics, for instance, want to acquire the needed knowledge concerning the culture of the second language, because they might encounter different situations in which they should be aware of the similarities and differences between their culture and the culture of the second/foreign language. The teacher may use texts related to the banking or monetary system of that particular country. By means of these texts, students learn not only the specific vocabulary they are interested in, but they find out new and interesting particularities about the country whose language they speak.<sup>18</sup> Debates are also very important since the students have the opportunity to express their views on different subjects and become conscious of the main differences between the two countries.

Learning expressions related to a telephone conversation, an interview or a negotiation, students become aware of the way they are supposed to act when dealing with foreign business partners. Courtesy phrases and nonverbal communication are of high importance for those students who will meet speakers of the second/foreign language in specific social situations that carry important implications not only socially but also psychologically.<sup>19</sup> Thus, teaching communication implies teaching culture. Before studying a language, the student has to get hold of a set of values and rules pertaining to

---

<sup>17</sup> Grigoriu , Gabriela, *An English Language Teaching Reader, vol. I*, Reprografia Universitatii din Craiova, 2000, p. 258.

<sup>18</sup> Hendor, Donald, Hendon, Rebecca Angeles, Herbig, Paul, *Cross-Cultural Business Negotiations*,: Praeger Publishers, Westport, 1996, p.44.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.,



that language. In the case of ESP students, it is important to be acquainted with the British and American culture, not only with the practical use of the language.

### **Conclusion**

As a conclusion, culture is very important in ESP classes, offering students the opportunity to behave correctly whenever they meet a member of another culture and to mediate attitudes and viewpoints of their own culture and those of the target culture. The cultural content in language teaching should involve materials related to the learner's own culture and the target culture to be able to compare and exchange information with others. Therefore, it is worth considering the teachers and students' cultural background and the types of cultures included in the textbooks to select which cultural contents fit the needs of students learning English for Specific Purposes.

## References

- Andrew Gonzalez, *The Cultural Content in English as an International Auxiliary language (EIAL): Problems and issues in Tickoo, M. L. (ed.): Language and Culture in Multilingual societies*
- Singapore: SEAMEO Regional Language Centre, 1995
- Byram M. and Fleming M., *Language Learning in Intercultural Perspective: Approaches through Drama and Ethnography*, Cambridge University Press, 1998
- Carol Morgan, “Teaching ‘Culture’ at A-level” in *Language Learning Journal*, No.7, 1993.
- Claire Kramsch, *Context and Culture in Language Teaching*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993
- Donald Hendor, , Rebecca Hendon, Herbig Angeles, Paul, *Cross-Cultural Business Negotiations*,: Praeger Publishers, Westport, 1996
- Gabriela Grigoriu, *An English Language Teaching Reader, vol. I*, Reprografia Universitatii din Craiova, 2000
- H. Douglas Brown, *Principles of language learning and teaching*, New York, (4th ed.),U.S., 2000
- Joyce Merrill Valdes, *Culture Bound, Bridging the Cultural Gap in Language Teaching*, Cambridge University Press, 1986
- Mohamed Ouakrime, *Formal and Deep Culture for E. F.L Students: A Course Proposal*, Faculty of Letters, Sidi Mohammed Ben Abdallah University, Fés, 1992.
- Sandra Lee McKay, *Teaching English as an International language*, Oxford University Press, 2002
- Susan L. Robertson, *Re-imagining and Rescripting the future of education: global knowledge economy discourses and the challenge to education systems*. Comparative Education, 2005
- Swiderski, Richard, *Teaching Language, Learning Culture*, Bergin & Garvey, 1993