

# **The Benefits of Cultural Studies in English Language Teaching**

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## **Abstract:**

There is no doubt that the number of people speaking English is constantly growing. It is used in many countries today either as a first language or as an alternative means for cross-cultural communication; roughly 700 million people speak it. Learning cultural studies will certainly raise the students' awareness in English language teaching concerning the target society.

The present communication aims at shedding light on some benefits of having cultural studies as part of the English syllabus, for the need for cultural literacy in English language teaching (ELT) arises particularly from the fact that Algerian students seem encounter significant problems in communicating with native speakers, for they are not exposed to cultural elements of the society in question. Teaching English seems senseless; inaccurate and incomplete if learners know nothing about its native speakers.

## **Introduction:**

Nowadays, many EFL educators believe that learning a new language means a lot more than the manipulation of syntax and lexis. Teaching the target language is incomplete without the study of its culture. If EFL learners know nothing

about the people or the country where the target language is spoken, this study seems senseless and incomplete. Incorporating the culture of the target language in foreign language (FL) teaching has been a subject of rapid change throughout language teaching history because FL educators have always been concerned with the relation that exists between language and culture.

## **Reasons of Teaching Culture**

Culture is now considered as the fifth skill of language in addition to speaking, listening, reading and writing. All societies have become internationalists by dealing with foreigners in and out the community itself, particularly with English as lingua franca, people operate internationally in a globalized world going abroad for travelling or business and communicating at a distance through emails or phones video-conferencing.

## **Benefits of Teaching Culture**

Teaching cultural studies to EFL learners would surely help them understand and appreciate the values, ways of doing things and special qualities of others so that they would become more tolerant and flexible to accept differences through a change in the attitude but expressed through the medium of language.

***"Studying culture gives students a reason to study the target language as well as rendering the study of L2 meaningful"***

***(Stainer, 1971).***

Chastain, (1971) states that learning culture would help learners relate the abstract sounds and forms of a language to real people and places. Other studies done by experts like Gardner and Lambert (1959, 1965, 1972) claim that in achieving high motivation, culture class does have a great role because learners like culturally based activities such

as singing, dancing, role playing, doing research on countries and peoples, etc. Moreover, studying culture gives learners a liking for the native speakers of the target language and also plays a useful role in general education for students could also learn about the geography, the history, the target life style of people etc. of the target culture (Cooke, 1970).

## Opposite Views

Other people believe that teaching cultural values is a form of cultural invasion or, more accurately, a form of linguistic globalization that emanates from cultural globalization. These individuals feel that teaching Western values to Arab students, for instance, will result in eroding their identity. There is no necessity for L2 speakers to internalize the cultural norms of native speakers of that language for an international language becomes de-nationalized.

## Forum Views

The question that has been raised in internet forum was: **"Should we teach language without culture?"** Many foreign language specialists and educators responded to the question giving their views; here are some of the selected ones:

a- **Leon Priz:** You cannot teach a language without teaching some culture. Language IS culture!

b- **Lucy Silver:** Learning a language includes its exposure and immersion in its cultural surroundings. Languages are created by and through culture; they embody culture. When you study and use a language, you study and learn the culture of the people who speak it.

c- **Laura Sicola:** Those who seek to learn only vocabulary and grammar, without cultural/pragmatic context, will very likely get themselves into more trouble than they know. Can you imagine someone learning Arabic without learning the phrase, "Insha'Allah"? Impossible.

d- **Peter Maximilian HM:** It's practically impossible to acquire language without delving deeply into the culture represented by the language

e- **Mai Aish:** We can't teach English or any other language without culture. I think culture is the main element in the teaching process and life generally. Culture means knowledge and open mind...so I can't teach without showing my students how others live their life and share them their knowledge.

f- **Sheila Thompson:** My teaching experience is limited to teaching Spanish speakers, most of whom are Spaniards. I consider it essential to teach them about British culture as so many of them will visit the UK sometime in their lives.

## **Case Study**

The present case study of third year students of English at Djillali Liabes University points at the students' views and attitudes towards the teaching of culture with the target language in general and the module of cultural studies in particular. To investigate this issue two questions were asked:

**1- Is it really important to teach Brit and Am cultural studies?**

**2- Does it really help students understand English better?**

In an attempt to answer these questions the following hypotheses were formulated:

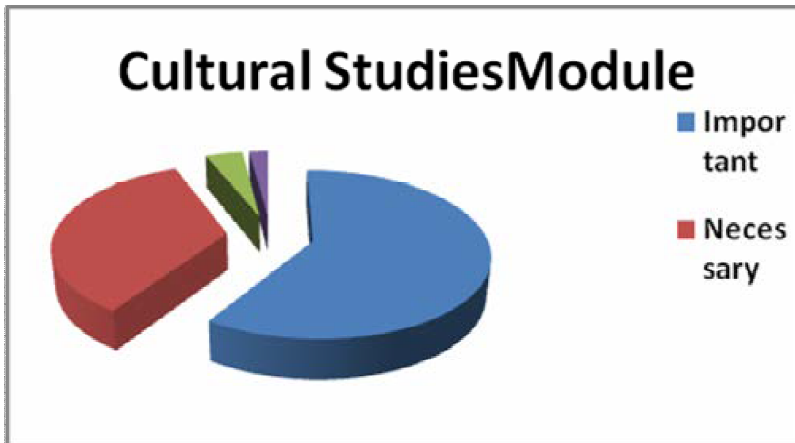
**1- Cultural studies contribute to promote EFL students language achievement.**

**2- Cultural studies would help students understand and appreciate the values and qualities of English language**

To test the formulated hypotheses, the researcher designed and distributed one structured questionnaire to collect data.

The participants in this study were fifty third year students of English randomly selected in the department of foreign language at Djillali Liabes University of Sidi Bel-Abbes, Therefore, they all share common cultural background; most of them plan to be teachers of English following their graduation. Some of the informants' responses were as follows:

In a question addressed to them, twenty nine out fifty (34%) think that cultural studies module is an important subject, seventeen (34%) view it necessary, while only three (6%) believe that is not important and unnecessary as it is displayed in the following pie chart.



**Pie chart 1. Cultural Studies Importance**

In another question forty students out fifty (80%) think that cultural studies courses help them learn and understand the English language; Moreover, these courses would contribute to raise their awareness and have a positive attitude towards the target culture of the target language.

Questions	Answers

<b>Does CS Courses module help you learn and understand English language?</b>	<b>Yes 80%</b>	<b>No 20%</b>
<b>Does the course help you raise awareness about the culture of the target language?</b>	<b>Yes 90%</b>	<b>No 10%</b>
<b>Does CS Courses module help you have a positive attitude? towards the target culture</b>	<b>Yes 90%</b>	<b>No 10%</b>

**Table 1. Students Responses about CS Benefits**

As far as the two last questions, eighteen percent of these students admit that the module of cultural studies (CS) help them familiarize enormously with the target culture, while twelve percent give a negative view; and the remaining students (70%) more or less believe that it does assist them to be familiar with foreign culture. Finally, most of them (72%) agree that CS courses allow them to understand British and American societies.

## **Discussion and conclusion**

It can be concluded that mostly the third year EFL students of English at Djillali Liabes University have a positive attitude towards the integration of culture in FL classes through the module of cultural studies. The research has also highlighted that the majority of the participants thought that such a module contributes to the raise of their awareness of the target culture. This Awareness might help them overcome possible misunderstanding and breakdowns of communication. Therefore, and to a large extent both hypotheses have been confirmed. It is worth noting that we cannot generalize the findings for it is a particular case study,

which is based on only one structured questionnaire as a research tool; this does not allow the researcher to crosscheck the data collected. Finally this short study reflects students' views, and we admit that giving the teachers the opportunity to express themselves on the subject would probably lead to other perspectives.

## **What topics to teach?**

Different educators have different suggestions concerning the question what kind of cultural information should be taught at the lessons of a foreign language, but generally, all of them suggest examining more or less the same topics, depending on the language level of the students, According to them, the content of cultural studies courses should cover the following areas: Social identity and social groups, Social interaction, Belief and behaviour Socio-political institutions, Socialization and the life-cycle, National history, National culture heritage, Stereotypes and national identity.

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion we would like to underline the need to include cultural studies as a subject to all EFL learners, for many researchers highlight the importance of culture as a component feature to be integrated into language teaching practice. We cannot be competent in the language if we do not also understand culture that has shaped it, and we cannot learn a second language if we do not have an awareness of that culture. 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. The call to teach English in isolation from its culture and the call to include only local cultural references while teaching English are all unwise and unreasonable.

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