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BRIDGING THE BARRIERS IN BRITISH CULTURE

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Abstract

There is a general observation among officials that the conflict between cultures has been dramatically increasing. This can be related to a whole set of reasons including: cultural unawareness, prejudice, the ignorance of differences in values, norms and beliefs and the media. The module of British culture is taught at the Departments of English in the Algerian universities from the first year. Many students think that in the course of British culture, the teacher is the only performer whose duty is to give them information about the target culture. Teaching British culture does not require from the teacher transmitting only information but developing positive attitudes, skills and awareness of values of this culture (Byram, Gribkova, & Starkey, 2002). The questions which are raised here are: are we as teachers of British culture preparing our students for a successful intercultural communication? Are we helping our students to develop their cultural awareness? This research paper was carried out through a questionnaire applied to second year students in British culture in particular to assess their cultural awareness. It focusses on the role of the teacher in helping students bridging the barriers and enabling them to interact successfully with people from other cultures.

Keywords

Culture, Prejudice, Values, Cultural Awareness, Communicative Competence

1. Introduction

Today many teachers are afraid of teaching the module of culture because their knowledge is limited. Providing students with information about the target culture, and enabling them to have a clear conception are among the main objectives of teaching British culture but this is not all what our students need. Nowadays, due to the globalization era and especially with the increase of the conflict between cultures, teachers of British culture should recognize the need to teach their students cultural perspectives namely attitudes, values and beliefs. The aim behind the introduction of such perspectives is to enable our students to respect, tolerate, understand and communicate successfully with people from other cultures. According to (Lopez, 2016: p107): “A person who has developed intercultural communicative competence is able to build relationships while speaking in the foreign language; communicate effectively, taking into consideration his own and the other person’s viewpoint and needs; mediates interactions between people of different backgrounds and strives to continue developing communicative skills”. Peck (1984) states that “the study of different cultures aids us to know different peoples which is a necessary prelude to understanding and respecting other peoples and their way of life”. The objective of the present paper is to help teachers of British culture understand that it is their role to prepare students to be good future intercultural communicators by arousing their cultural awareness. In so doing, we first define the word culture, and then we examine the objectives of teaching British culture with reference to cultural communicative competence and cultural awareness.

2. What is Culture?

There are hundreds of definitions of the word culture which show that it is “a very broad concept embracing all aspects of human life” (Seelye, 1993:15). According to (Brown, 1963), culture is “what binds people together”. Kramersch (1998:10) defines culture as “a common system of standards for perceiving, evaluating, and acting”. For (Byram 1997), the elements of the ‘big C’ include history, geography, institutions, literature, art and music and the way of life. The behaviour culture or ‘little c’ focusses on the behavioural pattern and life styles of everyday people. Vegh (2019) cites three aspects of culture namely: material (tools, foods and goods), social (language, religion and law) and physical (norms, attitudes and values). Seelye (1993) provides us with three components of culture which are expressed through the following diagram:

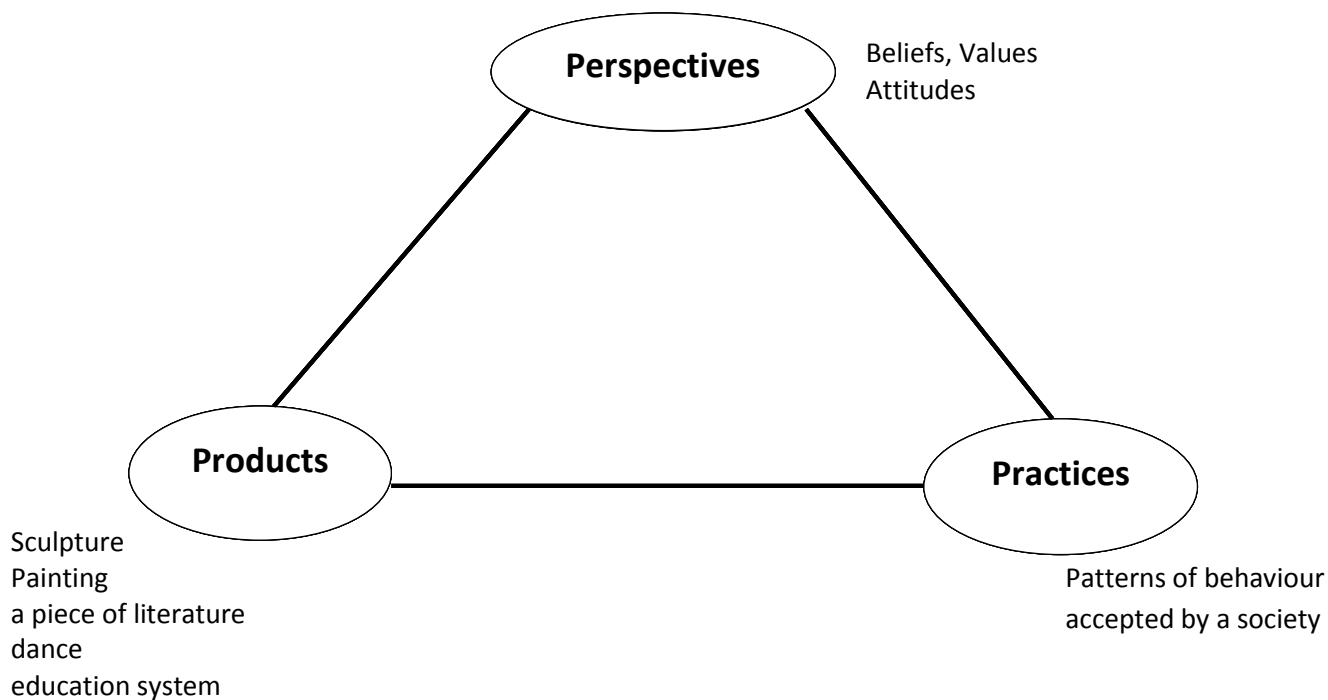


Figure 1: Cultural Components
Source: Seelye, H. N, 1993, p 5

3. What are the Objectives of Teaching Culture?

Teaching culture ‘should not aim at only giving information about the foreign culture, which is evident during foreign language teaching’ (Ciornei, & Tamga, 2013: 1920). The teacher of culture has also to give the learner the opportunity “to develop cultural knowledge, awareness and competence in such a way that might lead to better understanding of the foreign culture, the other as well as the learner’s own culture, the self“(Ciornei, & Tamga, 2013: 1920). Seelye (1993) points out that teaching culture ‘provides a framework for facilitating the development of cross-cultural communication skills.

Today, our students are living in the globalization era. Many of them have British friends, some travel abroad while others plan to finish their studies in Britain. In fact, there is still in many countries intolerance towards and prejudice against other cultures. Therefore, an intercultural education might be a solution to promote tolerance, acceptance, understanding and respect.

It is not the aim of the teacher of British culture to ‘change the students values but to make them explicit and conscious in any evaluative response to others’ (Byram, Gribkova, & Starkey, 2002). (Byram, 1993: 11) points out that “Misunderstandings are likely to occur between members of different cultures; ... differences are real and we must learn to deal with them in any situation in which two cultures come into contact”. The question which is raised here is: -Are we as teachers of British culture helping our students to achieve a successful intercultural communication?

4. What is the Intercultural Communicative Competence?

According to many language teaching professionals, intercultural competence was an extended as intercultural communicative competence (Lazar, et al., 2007). Lopez (2016) mentions that the intercultural competence is defined as “people’s ability to interact in their own language with people from another country and culture” whereas the intercultural communicative competence “focusses on the ability to interact with people from another country and culture in a foreign language”. According to (Lazar, et al., 2007:9), the intercultural communicative competence “requires certain attitudes, knowledge and skills as well as linguistic, sociolinguistic and discourse competence”. In order to achieve a successful communicative competence, he mentions five constructs that should be taken into consideration including “awareness, attitudes, skills, knowledge and language proficiency”. He also provides us with some qualities which describe the intercultural speaker including: “respect, empathy, flexibility, patience, interest, curiosity, openness, motivation, a sense of humour, tolerance for ambiguity, and a willingness to suspend judgement”.

Intercultural competence was the subject of the document of the Council of Europe (Jan 2001). The aim was that “mutual understanding and intercultural competence are more important than ever today” (Barrett, Byram, Lazar, Gaillard, & Philippou, 2014). Besides this, intercultural competence provides a foundation for being a global citizen. Despite all the recommendations, many teachers are still relying on grammatical and lexical competence. It is important to produce correct English either in speaking or writing but does fluency alone help our students to interact successfully with people from other cultures? The traditional method of teaching culture becomes no longer efficient. The teacher of British culture should focus on attitudes, values and beliefs instead of relying on only cultural products and practices.

One of the main objectives of teaching British culture is to enable students to communicate with people from a different cultural and linguistic background. To achieve this, the teacher has first to help his student acquire information and develop his cultural awareness.

5. What is the Cultural Awareness and How Can We Develop It?

Damen (1987) says that “cultural awareness involves uncovering and understanding one’s own cultural conditioned behaviour and thinking, as well as the patterns of others”. This means that the process involves recognizing the givens of our culture as well as perceiving the similarities and differences of the foreign culture. Cultural awareness as defined by (Tomalin & Stempleski, 1998:5) is “sensitivity to the impact of cultural induced behaviour on language use and communication”. It is considered as the foundation of communication and involves the awareness of one’s own culture and of the other one (Zhu: 2011). Cultural awareness becomes essential when we communicate with people from different cultures (Mengenai, 2012).

It is the teacher’s role to make students aware of cultural differences. What is considered as an appropriate behaviour in one culture is most of the time inappropriate in another one. In Algeria for example, people kiss each other and this is not the case in Britain. We also shake hands tens of time a day when we meet a friend. It is not the case in England. In other terms we should know how people create something elsewhere and behave consequently either in conformity or not.

Peck (1984) says that our students “want to touch, smell and see the British culture”. Offering them the chance to achieve this is our role as teachers of British culture. The teacher has to develop the cultural awareness of the students by making them aware of cultural differences. The reason behind this is to familiarize learners with the cultural components. Aspects to explore religion and etiquette are of a great help to promote cultural awareness. Examination of pictures, the use of currency and stamps, reading of original texts and engaging students in activities focussing on the life styles of people and on what people do in common situations will introduce cultural elements into the classroom and increase curiosity and awareness.

Most of the Algerian students see the British as cold, serious and competent. I usually enter the classroom ten minutes before the lecture. This led many of my students to tell me this expression: “Oh Miss you respect time like the British people”. It is clear that most Algerian students of English know that the British people respect time.

In order to assess students' cultural awareness, I prepared a questionnaire which included four questions and I asked 20 students to answer them. The questions were as follows:

- How do the British people behave in :
 - 1- Greetings
 - 2- Gift giving
 - 3- Public places
 - 4- Queuing

I faced a negative attitude from two students. The first said: Miss please we have our own principles, traditions and beliefs. Are we supposed to follow the British ones? The second said: "Miss you are so fascinated by the British people". I had to explain them that it is not the object of the questionnaire to change their principles.

Table 1: Students' Questionnaire Results

Questions	Responses	Number of Students	Percentage
1	They shake hands They say hello	17	85
2	They exchange chocolate and flowers	6	30
3	They respect the others They answer politely if you need a help	9	45
4	They respect the queue	16	80

It is clear from the table that the majority of students know how the British people behave in greetings and queuing. Only 30% know how the British people behave in gift giving whereas 45 % are aware of British behaviour in public places. Though students were asked to answer only the questionnaire, some of them made a comparison between British and Algerian behaviour. This shows that students are aware of the great differences which exist between the two cultures.

6. Conclusion

To sum up, in order to overcome the barriers in intercultural communication, we as teachers of British culture, need to provide our students with knowledge about the British people and help

them to be tolerant, to accept, understand and respect them. Hall.T (1959) points out that “it is the hidden elements which are responsible for culture shock and misunderstanding”. Once, the student understands that people are not the same and that differences can exist even between members of the same society, he will be able to respect the other. (Arabski &Wojtaszek 2011) state that “to communicate interculturally students need various kinds of skills, attitudes and cultural awareness” .Teachers’ challenges in teaching British culture can be the object of another paper.

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