Teaching culture in Taiwan's EFL classroom

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Abstract

Foreign language educators have long advocated that language and culture should be integrated in the language classroom. Eastern and Western cultures are quite different and sometimes while using the same language form, they are expressing different meaning. This study will examine how culture is integrated into the EFL classroom at college level. The purposes of this research are (1) to investigate the learning of culture in English as foreign language classrooms for college level students, (2) to explore the factors influencing EFL students’ learning, and (3) to compare the difference between Chinese and Western cultures. It is hoped that this study will help curriculum planners, English teachers and textbook writers to stress on the importance of teaching culture. By enhancing an awareness of the role of culture in language instruction, this study seeks to promote its inclusion in EFL curriculum. Finally, this study will provide a basis for future research in the area of culture and EFL instruction.

Keywords: EFL classroom, culture teaching, foreign language learning

1. Introduction

Foreign language educators have long advocated that language and culture should be integrated in the language classroom (Cummins, 1979; Prodromou, 1992). Part of the reason for this is that culture is inseparable from language and study. Omaggio (1984) also points out the importance of integrating culture into the foreign language classroom. Many EFL students find it difficult to develop good language skills because of cultural problems. Brooks, (1968) looking into the relationship between language and culture, states that “We cannot know what the new language means to the native speaker until we know in some systematic and fairly extensive way the meaning he attaches to the words and phrases he uses” (p.206).

Eastern and Western cultures are quite different and sometimes while using the same language form, they are expressing different meaning. For instance, when Western people say the word dinner, they may be referring to pizza or a hamburger. In Eastern culture, dinner might refer to steamed rice or dumplings. In other words, if people do not understand each other culture, misunderstandings may occur.

According to Chao (1991), “lack of sociocultural knowledge may produce serious problems for the students in coping with linguistic and cultural matters” (p.10). In other words, when this situation occurs in the EFL classroom,
it could become worse because Chinese culture is very different from Western culture. In order to have a better understanding of the Western world, teaching culture in the EFL classroom is a very good idea. Moreover, a combination of language and culture learning brings about a smooth interaction between people of different cultural backgrounds.

In Taiwan, the tendency of foreign language learning is an important issue. Moreover, students need to recognize the trend of the globalization all over the world and students need to develop a positive attitude and a global perspective (Ministry of Education, Republic of China, 2004). In the college level EFL classroom, the general goal related to culture is to facilitate the understanding of international affairs, the sharing of new information of the world, and the appreciation of foreign culture so that the students can be familiar with foreign and native cultures and world trends.

2. Problem of the study

English is the only foreign language that is required in university. Usually, English major students spend 20 hours studying English per week in school. In most universities, schools tend to have large classes, 40 to 50 students per class. Students are tested on vocabulary, grammatical rules and sentence structure. This is the only way that teachers check their understanding of English. Research shows that most of the students in Taiwan have low motivation and low levels of English proficiency (Ho, 1998). There are two main reasons why Taiwan’s EFL students do not learn English well. First, students have few opportunities to interact with native speakers and teachers do not provide sufficient information to help students have a better understanding of the culture. Second, teaching instruction is not geared toward students’ interests. Classroom instruction focuses only on the content covered in the textbooks.

3. Purpose of the study

This study will examine how culture is integrated into the EFL classroom at secondary school. The purposes of this research are (1) to investigate the learning of culture in English as foreign language classrooms for college level students, (2) to explore the factors influencing EFL students’ learning, and (3) to compare the difference between Chinese and Western cultures.

4. Method of the study

The purpose of this study was to investigate the use of culture in the foreign language classroom in Taiwan and to see if any factors will affect students’ learning.

A quantitative approach was used in the study. The researcher developed one questionnaires. One questionnaire was designed to gather background information from American main Holidays which the teacher mentioned before. See Appendix. Responses on the students’ survey were expected to reflect the understanding of culture teaching.

5. Result

In Table 1, the results of students’ responses for the questionnaire are shown. From Table 1, it can be seen that most students gave the right answers about the dates of Halloween, Thanksgiving, and Christmas. However, many students wrote the wrong answers about the date of Easter and the food ate on Easter (Questions 4 and 8). The reason is that Christmas is very popular in Taiwan. Although in Taiwan Halloween and Thanksgiving are not as popular as Christmas, these two festivals were taught in this semester. In Taiwan, the period of the fall semester is
from September to January and the two festivals are in the period. By contrast, since Easter is in April, it was not taught in the class of this semester. Therefore, the students were not familiar with the Easter and gave wrong answer about the festival. The Questionnaire reveals that learning the culture in the EFL classroom is indeed helpful for the students to understand the Western culture.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Questions</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
<th>6</th>
<th>7</th>
<th>8</th>
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<tr>
<td>Correct Answers</td>
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<td>34</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>34</td>
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<tr>
<td>Wrong Answers</td>
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<td>0</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>8</td>
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<tr>
<td>The Rate of Correct Answers</td>
<td>88.1%</td>
<td>81.0%</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>59.5%</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>97.6%</td>
<td>88.1%</td>
<td>81.0%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

6. Conclusion

Internationalization is a trend of all the countries in the world. Therefore, it is important to integrate culture teaching in the classroom. Culture teaching is also helpful for making students more interested in the study of foreign language. It is recommended that English teachers are encouraged to pay more attention to the ever-present cultural information through their daily lives, expose themselves to foreign media as much as possible such as reading magazines and books, watching films, television programs, and using the Internet.

Appendix

Content of Questionnaire
1. When is Halloween? Please note the month.
2. When is Thanksgiving? Please note the month.
3. When is Christmas? Please note the month.
4. When is Easter? Please note the month.
5. What do they eat in Halloween?
6. What do they eat in Thanksgiving?
7. What do they eat in Christmas?
8. What do they eat in Easter?

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References


