Integrating Culture into Language Teaching and Learning: Learner Outcomes

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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the issue of learner outcomes in learning culture as part of their language learning. First, some brief discussion on the role of culture in language teaching and learning, as well as on culture contents in language lessons is presented. Based on a detailed review of previous literature related to culture in language teaching and learning, the paper distinguishes three different levels of learner outcomes in learning culture, namely cultural knowledge, cultural awareness and cultural competence. It also suggests a framework for examining learner outcomes in learning culture towards the end of the discussion. Recommendations for further research are also provided.

INTRODUCTION

In tandem with the development of the communicative approach in language teaching and learning, the important role of culture as an interlinked part of language and the necessity of incorporating culture into language teaching and learning have been recognized worldwide. Without the study of culture, teaching language is inaccurate and incomplete. When a language is taught for its educational values, understanding the cultural contents associated with the language is significant (Lado, 1964). Hence, there has been a large body of research on culture in language teaching and learning. These studies, however, have examined different levels of learner outcomes in learning culture in a cursory manner, which often does not constitute their main focus (e.g., Byrd, Cummings Hlas, Watzke, & Montes Valencia, 2011; Chen, 2013; Georgiou, 2011; Gomez Rodriguez, 2012; Piątkowska, 2015; Salem, 2013). Moreover, these studies have not considered constructing a comprehensive framework of learner outcomes in learning culture. The present paper attempts to work on the related literature to make some suggestions on this issue.

In this paper, I review previous empirical studies related to integrating culture into language teaching and learning, that are drawn on the voice of language teachers and learners and classroom practice, to indicate the common tendencies of perceiving, expecting or evaluating the effects of including cultural aspects in teaching a language on learners. I then suggest a framework of learner outcomes in learning culture, which can be a useful reference for setting pedagogical objectives in teaching culture in the language classroom, and for evaluating what learners gain from learning culture while learning a language.

THE ROLE OF CULTURE IN LANGUAGE TEACHING

Culture plays an essential role in language teaching with the goal of promoting communicative competence for learners. Language competence and culture are intimately and dynamically connected (Rodriques, 2000), as the ability to communicate in a language requires knowledge of seeing, explaining and acting properly in accordance with the culture associated with the language (Omaggio & Hadley, 1986). Culture hence needs to be a central focus in language teaching, so that students will be able to communicate to the fullest extent (Hendon, 1980). If the main goal of communicative language teaching is to provide learners with meaningful interactions in authentic situations with native or like-native speakers of the target language, it is necessary to teach about the culture so that learners can know how to meet their communicative goals (Canale & Swain, 1980). According to Brown (2001), learners who are exposed to the culture associated with the language can better engage themselves in the authentic and functional use of the language for meaningful purposes.

In addition, if culture is integrated with the study of language, learners are to derive lasting benefits from their language learning experience (Omaggio & Hadley, 1986). According to Stainer (1971), studying culture renders the study of the second language meaningful. Culture learning, thus, can create motivation for language learning. Moreover, learners who gain certain cultural knowledge can develop more positive attitudes towards and come to be more tolerant with other cultures. They not only acquire the knowledge of other cultures, but also increase their understanding of their own culture (Lado, 1964). Therefore, culture needs to be integrated into the teaching of language knowledge and skills so that learners can learn to speak and write in culturally appropriate ways (Crozet & Liddicoat, 1997).

CULTURAL CONTENT IN LANGUAGE LESSONS

Teachers who are aware of the necessity of integrating culture into their language lessons often face the question of which culture(s) to be taught. Language education researchers have classified different types of cultural contents in language lessons to suit the purposes of their study. Kramsch (1995), for example, discusses three different "links" between language and culture. Universal links imply the culture that can be shared by various language speakers across social and national boundaries. National links refer to the cultures separated by the national boundaries such as French "civilization", German "landeskunde" or English "culture". Local links are related to the culture expressed through the words and actions of everyday speakers in everyday life. Cortazzi and Jin (1999) categorize three types of cultural information that can be represented in language lessons: the target culture, the source culture and the international culture. The target culture exposes learners to the culture of countries where the language they are learning is spoken as the first language. Learning the target culture, learners may be more interested in learning the language, or develop positive attitudes towards these language-speaking people and countries. The source culture draws on the learners' own culture. This culture can help students to develop a positive cultural identity. The international culture includes various cultures from various parts of the world, or cultural topics that are of concern to the global society (Matsuda, 2012). Learners can gain cross-cultural understanding of the sociolinguistic realities related to the language they learn from the international culture (Zacharias, 2014). Compared to other language teachers, teachers of English may be more familiar with the international culture associated with the

language they teach, as English is seen the global lingual franca which is spoken by a huge number of people across nations. In addition, Matsuda (2012), in discussing materials in teaching English as an international language, suggests the culture of learners' future interlocutors. She believes that as those interlocutors may be unknown, language teachers can strategically diversify the cultural contents and focus on the functional diversity of the language to equip learners with communication strategies in various situations and contexts.

LEARNER OUTCOMES: CULTURAL KNOWLEDGE, AWARENESS AND COMPETENCE

"Cultural knowledge, awareness and competence" is inspired by Fenner's (2000) idea that language education should be to give learners opportunities to develop cultural knowledge, competence and awareness of both the target culture and their own culture. Several language education researchers, in different ways, have mentioned the three levels of knowledge, awareness and competence in describing learner outcomes of culture learning (e.g., Georgiou, 2011; Larzén, 2005; Piątkowska, 2015). Piątkowska (2015), for example, distinguishes three main approaches of integrating culture into language teaching: the knowledge-based approach, the contrastive approach and the intercultural communicative competence approach. The knowledge-based approach aims to provide learners with knowledge of facts and information about the target language culture such as customs, habits, folklore of everyday life, literature or arts. The contrastive approach helps learners to be aware of similarities and differences between their own culture and the target language culture, and makes them to look for a connection between the two cultures (Thanasoulas, 2001). The intercultural communicative competence approach expects learners to develop their communicative skills which allow them to engage in interaction beyond the contexts of their own culture and the target language culture (Marczak, 2010).

Similarly, Larzén (2005) proposes three objectives of teaching culture, including knowledge about other cultures, skills for intercultural encounters, and tolerance and empathy. With the first objective of providing cultural background information, learners are made to gain some knowledge of factual information, information about cultural products or ways of living and thinking related to the target language culture. If following the higher objective of preparing for future intercultural encounters, learners should be aware of the social and socio-linguistic conventions of the target language culture. They should also learn how to communicate appropriately, get ready to be in direct contacts and be able to adapt themselves to the foreign culture. With the highest objective of promoting tolerance and empathy, learners are expected to work against stereotypes and prejudiced views of other cultures. It implies that learners who pursue this objective may not always agree with some certain features of other cultures, but can understand the value systems underlying its operation, respect and be tolerant of others' differences (Larzen-Ostermark, 2008).

Based on Piątkowska's (2015) and Larzén's (2005) three approaches/ objectives of culture teaching, I suggest three levels of learner outcomes in culture learning, including cultural knowledge, cultural awareness and cultural competence. Prior work examining the issue of integrating culture into language teaching is discussed in some details in three categories below.

Cultural knowledge

According to Byram (1989), cultural knowledge is structured and systematically presented information about culture. This information may be related to people, customs, habits, folklore of everyday life, cultural products, literature or arts, as well as the nature of culture and the processes of learning other cultures (Moran, 2001). Tomlinson and Masuhara (2004) believe that culture knowledge is often transmitted by somebody else, not modified from one own experience. In language classroom, cultural knowledge is often presented in "national links"—information about culture of different nations/ countries, such as the target language-speaking countries, learners' country or other countries (Kramsch, 1995).

Leaners may expect/ be expected to gain cultural knowledge of the target language culture only. Han (2010), for example, in a study on teachers' perceptions of culture teaching in secondary schools in China, finds that the teachers' understanding of culture often refers to small "c" cultural aspects of British and American societies such as folklore, food, festival or facts. The author discusses that the teachers did not fully engage with the objective of developing cultural communicative competence for their students in their English lessons. In a survey study investigating learners' perceptions of culture in their English learning, Sarıçoban and Çalışkan (2011) also report that the idea of leaning culture as learning facts, information and aspects of America and British cultures was common among the students. This result however may be influenced by the questionnaire, as the participants' ideas may be limited to several questions and answer-options.

Teachers who intend to provides learners with cultural knowledge can mention aspects of both the target language culture and the source culture. In a study investigating native English speaking teachers' views on the role of culture in teaching English to Japanese students, Stapleton (2000) points out that the teachers randomly introduced cultural information—mainly surface elements of culture that were visible and apparent such as language, food or appearance—as part of their language teaching. They however occasionally made an effort to bring contrastive structures into their teaching by comparing English and Japanese cultural aspects. Likewise, in examining three beginning Spanish classrooms at a university in the Rocky Mountain region, Waite (2006) discusses that culture was taught in an "information" type approach—which was based on simply learning facts about the culture of Spanish speaking countries such as Peru, Colombia, Argentina or Cuba—in these classrooms. The author observed that sometimes these cultural features were also compared with those of the students' own culture.

Teachers can sometimes include knowledge of not only the target language culture and the source culture, but also culture of other countries in their language lessons. An example of this comes from Nguyen's (2013) study on how university Vietnamese teachers integrating culture in teaching English. The teacher participants of this study admitted that they addressed culture only when a cultural topic (e.g., food and drink, life style or traditional festivals) was included in their teaching materials. They often mentioned cultural aspects of English-speaking countries, Vietnam, and occasionally, Morocco, Africa, Japan and China and asked their students to made comparisons of cultural points of different countries. The author however argues that by prioritizing the provision of cultural knowledge, the teachers missed many opportunities to help their students to improve the latter's intercultural skills. Another evidence of integrating cultural aspects of different nations in language teaching comes from Klein's (2004) study on US-high school foreign language teachers' conceptualizations of culture and culture learning. The four individual cases of two French and two German teachers in this study commonly defined culture by mentioning facts,

habits, events, products and practices. The author also observed that there were comparisons in their culture teaching: Americans do this, Germans, French, Senegalese, or Bavarians do that, for example.

Cultural awareness

Cultural knowledge, as "pure information" is useful. It however does not help learners to develop critical thinking. In addition to knowledge, it is expected that language learners need to increase their awareness of culture under study (Valette, 1986). Cultural awareness, in Tomalin and Stempleski's (2013, p. 5) view, is "sensitivity to the impact of culturally induced behavior on language use and communication". While culture knowledge is often transmitted by somebody else (Tomlinson & Masuhara, 2004), cultural awareness is gained from personal experience. Acquiring cultural knowledge, at a higher level, learners are more aware of others' culture and their own culture's values and beliefs. They can understand strategic cultural cues or principles to use the language successfully in different cultural contexts and to integrate themselves into different cultural environments, while still maintaining their own cultural identity.

Learners' cultural awareness can be presented as their awareness of the target language culture. Blair (2002), for instance, in a study examining how conducting ethnographic interviews can promote openness toward culture learning, indicates that this teaching approach could help the students to develop more positive awareness of and openness towards the target culture. The students from two second-year Spanish classes, after learning to apply ethnographic interviewing skills and conducting interviews with a native Spanish speaker, revealed that they had an opportunity to ally with a native Spanish—the opportunity which they had seldom experienced before—and increase their understanding for and affective attitudes towards Spanish speakers. Another example of raising learners' awareness of the target language culture is found in Snodin's (2015) study on Thai teachers and students' perceptions and practices in relation to integrating culture into English teaching and learning, and how course materials were designed within the Thai curriculum framework. During the course, the students' knowledge of everyday cultures of native English speakers was promoted. The students reported that after the course, they changed their perspectives towards the advantages of cultural knowledge, perceived cultural knowledge as practical, useful and relevant to their lives, and developed an awareness of the role of culture in facilitating better communication with English-speaking people.

Learners' cultural awareness can be shown as their perceptions and understandings of both the target language culture and their own culture. In Waite's (2006) study (as previously mentioned), for example, the author observed that in addition to providing cultural information related to Spanish-speaking countries, the teachers occasionally applied a "process oriented culture" approach in their teaching. This approach, although not frequently used, allowed the students to see and experience another culture, to make comparisons and contrasts with their own culture, and to develop an insider's view of the target language without actually travelling to the target culture. Leaners' awareness of the target language culture and the source culture is also found in Brooks-Lewis' (2014) qualitative action-research study discussing how she designed and applied a special introductory English course centering on intercultural communication and awareness for her adult learners in Mexico. The learner participants of the study believed that comparison and contrast the English culture with their own culture helped them to see "real" people speaking the target language and to be aware of how culture affected individuals' thinking,

acts and behavior. This learning approach also brought about an "enriching appreciation" of their own culture and perception of their cultural identity.

In the age of English, the international language, English learners' cultural awareness can include the awareness of the international culture shared by all people speaking English worldwide. Fang (2011), in a study investigating views on teaching and learning culture and English among students in a university in Southern China, reports the participants' positive attitudes towards the target language culture, the source culture and international cultures. Most of the students wanted to reflect on their home culture when learning English, reorient and rethink their own culture, and raise their awareness of their cultural and national identity. They were also aware of the importance of international cultures, as they believed that it was not enough to merely focus on the so-called "Western culture" in this era of multiculturalism and cultural diversity. The students hence agreed that their home culture should be presented in the framework of multiculturalism.

Cultural competence

Learning culture of a language is a process including acquiring cultural knowledge and developing cultural awareness, that gradually lead learners to be closer to a higher level of cultural outcomes called cultural competence. Cultural competence involves "the acquisition of resources to deal with interlocutors of diverse ethnic backgrounds" and "an awareness of cultural diversity and an ability to recognize and accept differences and manage them successfully" (Barraja-Rohan, 1999, p. 143). Gaining cultural competence does not mean that one must accept that culture or has an "obligation to behave in accordance with the social conventions" (Kramsch, 1993, p. 181). It implies someone who is able to see the relationships between different cultures and have a critical understanding part of their own and other cultures (Byram, 2000). At this level of culture learning, leaners are expected to not only acquire cultural knowledge and raise cultural awareness, but also develop their ability to reflect, self-reflect, argue and construct their own critical views of different cultural issues and their cultural identity, that help building their tolerance and harmony with themselves, with other people and cultures. Culture competence, therefore, may not be separately presented as competence of the target language culture, the source culture or the international culture, but as "intercultural competence".

It is suggested from my literature review that cultural competence as learner outcome in language teaching and learning is often found in studies which employ an action research approach. In this approach, teachers purposefully design and apply intercultural language courses/ lessons for learners of higher language learning levels in an attempt to intervene learner outcomes in learning culture. Gomez Rodriguez (2012), for example, used multicultural pieces of American literary work for the purpose of developing intercultural and multicultural communicative competence for his English learners in a university in Colombia. The students were exposed to literature activities in which they identified, compared and contrasted different cultural aspects, addressed and discussed critically issues related to discrimination, gender, prejudices, identity, and stereotypes. After the course, the students realized that they became more reflective and critical readers and made progress toward becoming more critical intercultural learners. Likewise, Su (2011) designed a cultural portfolio project for some college students learning English in Taiwan to examine the effects of this project on their culture learning. The students experienced changes in their views of culture in and after doing the project, such as self-evaluating and modifying their original cultural hypotheses, avoiding misconceptions, assumptions and stereotypes. They also

moved from an ethnocentric view to respecting cultural differences and diversity, and demonstrated sensitivity to and respect for individual and small-group variation within and across cultures.

Another evidence of purposefully applying culture contents in language teaching to examine learners' cultural competence development comes from Salem's (2013) study on Lebanese university students' intercultural competence. Most students who attended the intercultural course reported that they developed the ability to reflect on their own culture, the willingness to be more flexible, tolerant and open towards otherness. They also claimed that they were implementing the cultural knowledge in their daily life, that helped them to construct mutual respect and build relationships with friends from different regions. Similarly, Georgiou (2011) created an intercultural syllabus for her teaching of an English writing course in University of Nicosia, that aimed to facilitate learners' new understandings and insights around cultural diversity. Some findings reveal that the students portrayed cultural others in more positive ways: they increased their cultural self-awareness, expressed more empathy and solidarity, acknowledged heterogeneity within national cultures, and perceived that insufficient knowledge of culture may lead to misconceptions.
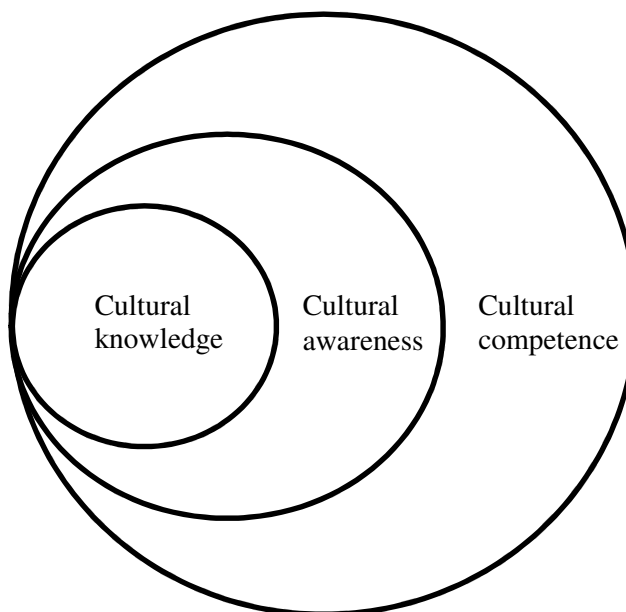
The framework

This paper has reviewed previous empirical studies related to integrating culture into language teaching, that are drawn on the voice of language teachers and learners and classroom practice, to indicate the common tendencies of perceiving, expecting or evaluating the effects of including cultural aspects in teaching a language on learners. Drawing from Fenner (2000) and Georgiou's (2011) idea of cultural knowledge, cultural awareness and cultural competence, Larzén (2005) and Piątkowska's (2015) three approaches/ objectives of culture teaching, and the reviewed literature, I suggest a framework for examining learner outcomes in learning culture, including three levels:

• The first level is cultural knowledge: Learners are expected to gain, to a certain extent, information about the target language culture, their own culture or some other cultures. This information may include, but not limited to, people, customs, habits, folklore of everyday life, cultural products, literature and arts.

• The second level is cultural awareness: Learners should have good cultural knowledge. They are expected to be able to raise their perception and awareness of cultural values and beliefs, make comparisons and contrasts between others' culture and their own culture. They understand strategic cultural cues or principles to communicate and integrate successfully in different cultural contexts, while still maintaining their own cultural identity.

• The third level is cultural competence: Learners should have broad cultural knowledge and deep cultural awareness. They are not only able to understand and participate successfully in cross-cultural contexts, but also able to self-experience, reflect, analyze, argue and construct their own critical views of different cultural issues and their positive cultural identity.

Figure 1. Learner outcomes in learning culture

In short, the framework includes three levels of learner outcomes in learning culture: cultural knowledge, cultural awareness (involving cultural knowledge), and cultural competence (involving cultural knowledge and cultural awareness) (see Figure 1).

CONCLUSION

The three-level framework of learner outcomes in learning culture, as previously discussed, can be a useful reference for setting pedagogical objectives in teaching culture in the language classroom, and for evaluating what learners gain from learning culture while learning a language. This framework, however, needs to be tested and validated by empirical data. Therefore, I recommend that further research on this issue may focus on designing suitable qualitative and quantitative data collection tools, as well as providing empirical evidence for the framework. Castro, Sercu and Méndez García's (2004, p. 99) nine-item question which was designed to investigate language teachers' perception of culture teaching objectives regarding knowledge, attitudinal and behavioral dimensions, for example, can be a good reference for constructing a questionnaire referring to the framework; although this question needs to be adapted, modified and expanded to suit the purposes of different studies. Further research can also seek to examine learner outcomes in learning culture in classes of different language levels applying this framework.

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