

A Thematic-Based approach to the Teaching of British and American Civilisation to Enhance EFL Learners' Intercultural Communication

Ahmed Mehdaoui

The English Department of Ibn Khaldoun University of Tiaret, Algeria

Abstract One of the basic purposes of teaching British and American civilisation at the EFL department is to provide students the skills that help them to become critical observers of British and American culture as well as their own. This means the ability to develop the intercultural skills. Therefore, a proper method is necessary to achieve this aim. One of the methods that fulfil this aim is using the thematic approach instead of providing students with functional information in chronological ways. This paper explains the role of the Thematic-Based Approach in teaching both civilisation and culture. It also describes how this teaching technique has the potential in developing the University EFL learners' intercultural communicative skills.

Keywords English, English Civilisation, Culture, Intercultural Communication, Thematic-Approach

1. Introduction

At present, interculturality has become a necessity to build long lasting relationships. In this vein, many countries, including Algeria, recognize the importance of teaching culture to develop learners' intercultural skills. The programme of Civilisation at the EFL department is considered as one of the main sources of teaching and learning language and culture. The course offers students information on the main aspects of life (culture, society, institutions...) with historical background. It is first intended to improve students English language skills by helping them to be acquainted with new vocabularies and terms they use in communication. Second, it is intended to make students aware of the cultural, historical and social phenomena of these people. This is necessary for them as long as they cannot learn English language without knowing some knowledge about the country that gave birth to this language.

In our specific context- the English Department at the University of Tiaret and certainly in other academic contexts in Algeria, it is found that the teaching of civilisation has always been on conventional views of historical facts rather than exploring other main cultural aspects. Teachers only focus on the factual knowledge and information while neglecting the other aspects in which the intercultural understanding can be developed. This is based on the belief

that one can understand the culture of certain people through the study of their history.

This limited understanding usually leads to the neglect of teaching civilisation as a cultural subject, especially if we consider that teachers themselves are not specialised in teaching history. Moreover, such method of teaching does not combat students' ignorance about the others. Through this teaching method, any country could be stereotyped by others. For instance, our EFL learners may still perceive Britain as a country of monarchy, castles, quaint behavior, aristocracy, and arrogant people.

Eventually our EFL students' intercultural skills are impossible to be developed under this historical approach. In this work, we argue that teachers' way of teaching is one of the reasons that prevent the flow of other main cultural aspects.

1.1. Presentation of the Programme of Civilisation at the Algerian EFL Departments

The programme of civilisation has long been one of the main subjects at Algerian EFL departments since the introduction of English at the Algerian universities. The programme of Civilisation at the EFL department is considered as one of the main sources of teaching and learning language and culture. The course offers students information on the main aspects of life (culture, society, institutions...) with historical background. It is first intended to improve students English language skills by helping them to be acquainted with new vocabularies and terms they use in communication. Second, it is intended to make students aware of the cultural, historical and social phenomena of

* Corresponding author:

merveste@gmail.com (Ahmed Mehdaoui)

Published online at <http://journal.sapub.org/jalll>

Copyright © 2015 Scientific & Academic Publishing. All Rights Reserved

these people. This is necessary for them as long as they cannot learn English language without knowing some knowledge about the country that gave birth to this language.

As important cultural subject, the programme of civilisation starts initially from the first year. It aims to prepare students in their second years of study, and pave the way to third year students who attend literature and civilisation branch. As the main area of their study, this course provides third year students the skills that help them to become critical observers of British and American culture as well as their own so that they can develop the notion of intercultural understanding. Due to the importance of civilization programme, it is accumulated a significant coefficient and number of credits. This gives the course a significant importance in the curriculum.

However, the time devoted to this important programme is limited to only one hour and half per a week. This may be one of the challenges that face teachers of civilisation. However, some researchers state that when students receive very few hours of study, the teacher can pay special to other teaching methods and materials to that reflect both the current global requirements and their students' interest.

1.2. The Use of Thematic-Based Approach

Researchers in the field of second/foreign language learning warn against the use of factual culture approach ([1], [2], [3], [4], [5], and others), and that culture should not be reduced to big 'C' culture or small 'c' culture. There other cultural aspects are needed to be explored by both teachers and learners.

While culture of any particular people can be lost when it is taught through using the traditional chronological approach, the thematic approach has its own inner dynamic and can help students develop more cultural knowledge on more than one topic. Students usually feel that the civilisation course is tedious because the content of this course is more historical and is taught as history. It lacks many cultural aspects; therefore, the historical part has to be reduced to allow the addition of many cultural elements (family, beliefs, scientific and artistic achievements), and finally, civilisation has to focus on nowadays issues.

This course can be easier and attractive when is taught thematically, because teaching thematically allows all students to enjoy the course. [7] believes that culture can be best learnt when taught in thematic ways. For example, each time students are presented to some cultural themes such as religion, education, family, ethnicity, value, and the like. Therefore, a better approach would not be to try to teach civilisation in term of history, as it is the case now, but rather to take some themes as the content, and then put the focus on using these themes to teach the elements of intercultural competence, as it is explained in [8]' book, 'Teaching and Assessing intercultural Competence'. For example, one theme would be 'Family in England or in America', and then followed by some of the ideas described by [9] which are described in 'Developing Intercultural Competence in

Practice' book.

The crucial elements would be learning skills, learning some facts but only as examples and being able to use those skills to investigate and compare other aspects of culture in British and American culture. Hence, the use thematic based approach is one of the best ways to counter any negative overseas images.

2. Research Method

2.1. The Participants

40 third year university English language students (in two experimental and control groups of 20) took part in this study, 27 were female and 13 were males. The participants were university students at the University of Tiaret, the researcher' own faculty, majoring in BA English specialty, and their level of English was advanced. The participants of both control and experimental groups had an age of 21 to 26.

2.2. Data Collection and Procedure

The tool used in this research was a pre-test and a post-test for both control and experimental group.

Step 1: Both groups were required to answers 20 randomly selected questions related to American civilisation and culture (identity, social conditions and equality, cultures-traditions, values, beliefs, and assumptions); (see the appendix below).

The questions that were open-ended questions and close-ended questions (yes/no questions and multiple choice questions) were graded by an EFL university professor who was specialised in teaching British/American civilisation and culture at the same researcher' own English department. The correct answers to the yes/no and multiple choice questions were graded 1 point. However, with the open- ended questions, 1 point was graded to the correct answers and 0.5 point was graded to the approximately correct answers.

Step 2: While the control group attended their civilisation courses that was taught as usual as a history focusing on the historical facts and factual information of American people (discovery, battles, wars, presidency, geography, reforms, etc), the 20 students of the experimental group went through 6 sessions of instruction in which the programme was grouped into multiple 'themes' instead of using the traditional method that focused on chronological order. They were taught by the researcher about American diversity and equality, religions, culture and customs, and beliefs and assumptions.

So as it can be seen, history is not neglected; it is still there but it is enriched with knowledge that used to be not fully uncovered.

Step 3: After the six sessions of teaching, a post-test was administered for both groups, in which the same pre-test questions were used in order to know the degree of students' improvement.

2.3. Data Analysis Procedures

In order to examine the main differences between the control group and experimental group, different statistical way of analysis were used such as means, students' errors of means, variance, and students' deviation.

3. The Result

Having a look at the above table, we notice that there are no differences between the control and the Experimental groups. Both groups could provide only answers to questions related to some factual based information of American history and achievements while they both showed limited knowledge about other deep and hidden culture of the American people. This can be seen from their lower scores of the pre-test. As it can be seen, the students' students' deviation (SD) was almost the same (the SD of the experimental group was 1, 29269, and the SD of the control group was 1, 27321. Besides, the range of both groups was almost the same (5 and 5, 50), and the mean was also nearly the same (7,2500 for the experimental group, and 7,1000 for the control group).

Having a look at the post-test table results revealed that there were significant differences between the control group and the experimental group. The statistical information showed evidence that the use of the thematic based instruction was successful. One can notice from the above table. While the post-test mean of control group remained almost as the same as the pretest (7,6000), the mean of the experimental noticeably increased to (14,6250). This is also apparent from difference of the students' deviation (SD) between both groups. While control group SD was (7,7119), the experimental group SD was (1,97268).

These significant differences explain that the use of thematic based teaching was successful as it helped students to have more deeply cultural knowledge. As students of the control group remained with insufficient knowledge about the culture of the American people, the cultural knowledge

of the experimental group notably was developed. This means that the use of thematic-based instruction has the ability to enhance learners' intercultural communication.

3.1. Discussion of the Result

The result of this research reveals that the contents of the civilisation course is mainly historical and lacks many cultural aspects. The focus has always been on detailed historical facts of the target people. This can be noticed from the pre-test for both the control and the experimental groups' response to the questions. They could provide answers to some factual information while they failed to answer other cultural based information; their understanding about the American culture is limited to some historical facts. This is one of the reasons that make the majority of our EFL students to have a limited understanding about the meaning of culture. This makes their cultural understanding not to be developed if one of the most important cultural subjects like civilisation is taught as a history rather than exploring the main cultural aspects of its people.

But this does not have to do only with content, but it is apparent that it has also to do with the way of teaching in which the mastery of English structure is given more importance than English culture. Researches in the field of language education reveal that it is impossible to teach language without culture. Besides, it seems that the way of teaching, where lecturing is the favorite method, is less interesting and motivating for students; this method keeps students passive learners. Hence, there remain few opportunities for them to negotiate and discuss cultural meanings in the classroom.

In this vein, due to the overloaded curriculum and lack of time to cover all the cultural aspects including factual and procedural knowledge, the historical parts have to be reduced to allow the addition of many cultural elements (family, beliefs, scientific and artistic achievements), and finally, civilisation has to focus on nowadays issues. Therefore, civilisation course can be more interesting when is taught thematically.

Table 1. Pre-test comparative results between the control and the experimental groups

VAR00001

PRETEST	N	Range	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation	Variance	Std. Error of Mean
CONT	20	5,00	4,00	9,00	7,1000	1,27321	1,621	,28470
EXP	20	5,50	4,00	9,50	7,2500	1,29269	1,671	,28905
Total	40	5,50	4,00	9,50	7,1750	1,26871	1,610	,20060

Table 2. Post-test comparative results between the control and the experimental groups

VAR00002

POS TEST	N	Range	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation	Variance	Std. Error of Mean
CONT	20	3,00	6,00	9,00	7,6000	,77119	,595	,17244
EXP	20	7,00	11,00	18,00	14,6250	1,97268	3,891	,44110
Total	40	12,00	6,00	18,00	11,1125	3,85222	14,840	,60909

3.2. Examples on how to Use the Thematic Approach American Civilisation

The theme: Diversity and Ethnicity in the United States of America.

The United States of America is a multilingual society, racially and ethnically. Six ethnic groups are officially recognized: White, American Indian and Alaska Native, Asian, Black or African American, Native Hawaiian and Other Pacific Islander. The United States is also classified as "Hispanic or Latino" and "Not Hispanic or Latino", which means that the Hispanic and Latino Americans are identified as a racially diverse *ethnicity* that composes the largest minority group in the nation.

The key words: the native, colonisation, slavery, multiculturalism, inequality.

Objectives: Students will be able to understand the historical trends influencing the ethnic demographics of the United States. This includes:

- 1) The native: Original settlement of the Americas by a variety of Native American peoples.
- 2) Colonisation: the colonisation of the Thirteen Colonies as part of British America, and the Spanish territories which influenced the later acquisitions of Florida, and some other Southwest territories.
- 3) The Atlantic slave trade: bringing many Africans to the new world.
- 4) Immigration: Historical immigration to the United States from all countries of the world and throughout the history of the country, usually for economic or political reasons.

Finally, students will develop a better understanding about the different American ethnic groups, and how they all live in coexistence.

In discussing such theme, teachers should put a heavy focus on the key words that best explain the situation. The key words in the text, for example, can be underlined to lead students for better understanding and discussions. Students may then be required to do individual researches about some issues they are curious about.

4. Conclusions

By way of conclusion, it is important for teachers to be reminded that the major goal nowadays of teaching foreign language is to develop learners' intercultural understanding and communication. This, in return, entails the inclusion of language and culture. Therefore, foreign language teachers should not act as neutral in teaching foreign languages; their role is extremely important in fostering foreign language teaching and learning goal.

Subsequently, it becomes crucial for them to provide successful learning strategies to establish an intercultural understanding in their classrooms.

Appendix (A): Example of Some Questions Used in Both Pre-test and Post-test

1. What are the major ethnic groups in the United States of America today?
2. How important are national identities within the United States of America?
3. How do the American people consider themselves?
 - a) American citizen
 - b) based on their origin background
 - c) immigrants
4. What is the American main religion?
5. How equal are the American men and women in the home?
6. How do American shopping habits compare with those in your country?
7. What traditional dishes are served in the United States on Thanksgiving, and what is the history behind them?
8. How do the American people greet each other?
 - a) Do they hug?
 - b) Shake hands?
9. If you want to break the ice making a small talk with an American whom you do not know well. Which topic would you choose?
 - a) Family
 - b) weather
 - c) politics
 - d) sports
 - e) money
 - f) religion
10. People in the US sometimes wink at each other. This can mean someone is:
 - a) Joking
 - b) they like you in a sexual way
 - c) according to the context

REFERENCES

- [1] Brooks, N. (1968). Teaching Culture in the Foreign Language Classroom. In Heusinkveld, P (Ed.), "Pathways to Culture" (pp 11-35). Intercultural Press.
- [2] Brislin, Richard W. (ed.) (1990). Applied Cross-cultural Psychology. London: Sage.
- [3] Byram, M. (1997). Teaching and Assessing Intercultural Communicative Competence. London: Multilingual Matters.
- [4] Stern, H. H. (1992). Issues and Options in Language Teaching. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- [5] Seelye, H. N. (1993). Teaching Culture, Strategies for Intercultural Communication. Lincolnwood, III.: National
- [6] Tomalin, B. & Stempleski, S. (1993). Cultural Awareness. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- [7] Nostrand, H. L. (1974). Empathy for a second culture: Motivations and techniques. In G.A. Jarvis (Ed.), Responding to new realities (pp.263-327). The ACTFL Foreign Language Education Series, Lincolnwood, IL: National Textbook.

- [8] Byram, M. (1997). Teaching and Assessing Intercultural Communicative Competence. London: Multilingual Matters.
- [9] Duffy. D and Mayes. J. (2001). Family life and regional identity - comparative studies while learning French. In Byram, M., Adam Nichols & David Stevens (Eds.), Developing Intercultural Competence in Practice. (pp. 93-110). London: Multilingual Matters.