



10.5281/zenodo.14949472

Vol. 08 Issue 02 Feb - 2025

Manuscript ID: #01772

The relationship between foreign language teaching and culture

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Abstract

Language and culture are closely intertwined and inseparable. Learning a nation's language means simultaneously approaching their culture. Educators need to pay special attention to the cultural factor in the teaching process. Culture is an inseparable element, playing a key role in guiding students to reach a level of natural communication. Therefore, it is necessary to choose appropriate teaching methods, design systematic activities, and introduce the culture implicit in the language in a systematic way. With the right awareness, effective approaches and systematic activities, educators need to research and summarize practical experiences. This contributes to solving the challenges in language teaching, which is always closely linked to culture. This article, based on practice, will analyze, search for and propose optimal solutions to the problem: How to integrate cultural factors in foreign language teaching to improve learners' communication effectiveness.

Keywords:

Language; Culture; Foreign language; foreign language teaching.

How to cite: Hue, N. T. (2025). The relationship between foreign language teaching and culture. *GPH-International Journal of Educational Research*, 8(02), 58-64.
<https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.14949472>



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1. Problem statement

In the context of globalization, the interaction between cultures requires a common means of communication to promote comprehensive development. Language, especially English as a global language, has partly met this need. However, cultural understanding is the decisive factor for success in cross-cultural communication. Therefore, cultural education, especially in the field of language education, becomes urgent. The comment of linguist Winston Breambeck: "knowing a language without understanding their culture is the best way to make yourself a fool who speaks a foreign language fluently," is really worth pondering. Language and culture have a mutual relationship, language is a means of transmitting and developing culture. Therefore, focusing only on language and ignoring culture is a big mistake. Each individual is the heir to his or her mother tongue and national culture. Preserving and promoting this precious heritage is a lifelong process. However, in the context of international integration, balancing identity preservation and global integration poses a great challenge. Culture and language are not outside this historical flow. To solve this difficult problem, it is necessary to have a deep understanding of cultural and linguistic identity, clearly recognize the differences and intersections between cultures. From there, we can both firmly preserve our own identity and flexibly absorb the quintessence of other cultures, contributing to common development. Currently, the goal of foreign language training is to achieve effective communication skills. Integrating cultural elements into the teaching and learning process has become extremely important. Although the benefits of learning culture in foreign language learning have been recognized, cultural teaching has not been given due importance in many foreign language programs. Recently, awareness of the role of culture in foreign language teaching has been raised, however, choosing effective and appropriate teaching methods is a matter that needs to be given top priority. The appropriate application of cultural teaching activities, suitable to specific conditions, will contribute to improving the effectiveness of foreign language teaching in general and English in particular.

2. CONTENTS

2.1. Concept of culture

The concept of "culture" contains great diversity and complexity. To define it, we need to consider two constituent elements. First, human culture or social culture includes the totality of human attitudes, customs, daily activities, reflecting thinking, values, evaluation standards and language. Second, the history of civilization, including geographical factors, historical processes and achievements in science, humanities and arts. From there, culture is analyzed into many smaller components. This perspective partly explains the current state of cultural teaching and the challenges in the context of foreign language education today. Culture is considered a system of beliefs and behaviors recognized by society. However, not all individuals in the same culture have completely identical thinking and actions. The concept of culture is highly individualized. In 1871, E.B. Tylor defined: "Culture or civilization, in the broad sense in anthropology, includes knowledge, belief, art, morality, law, custom, and other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of a community." This definition considers culture and civilization as a unified concept, covering

all aspects of human life, from knowledge, belief to art, morality, and law. It can be said that this is an "encyclopedia" definition, listing all areas of human creativity. President Ho Chi Minh affirmed: "Due to the need for survival and the purpose of life, mankind created and invented languages, writing, morality, law, science, religion, literature, art, and tools for daily life in terms of food, accommodation, and methods of use. All of these creations and inventions are culture." According to this point of view, culture includes all human creative products. Similar to Tylor's definition, President Ho Chi Minh's viewpoint is also "encyclopedia", reflecting comprehensively all fields related to human life. Pham Van Dong, with his broad vision, defined culture comprehensively. He affirmed that culture is a vast, extremely rich category, encompassing all human activities, separate from nature, parallel to the historical development process. According to his viewpoint, culture is the total system of spiritual values, ethics, intelligence, talent, ability to absorb and create, community awareness, national spirit, strength and ability to protect and develop sustainably. Culture, accordingly, is a product of human intelligence and soul, from personal feelings to community awareness, the potential strength of each individual and nation. Recently, many domestic and foreign researchers often refer to UNESCO's definition (1994) of culture, with two levels of understanding: broad and narrow. In a broad sense, culture is a complex whole, including spiritual, material, intellectual and emotional elements, reflecting the identity of the community, from family, village to nation and society. Culture is not only limited to art and literature, but also encompasses lifestyle, human rights, value systems, traditions and beliefs. In a narrow sense, culture is understood as a system of symbols, signs, governing behavior and communication, creating unique characteristics of each community. Overall, the definitions of culture are extremely diverse, each definition focuses on different aspects. The definitions of Tylor and Ho Chi Minh emphasize human achievements in the development process, including knowledge, religion, ethics, language, music, law, etc. Meanwhile, UNESCO's definition is broader, considering all human achievements in life as part of culture. This diversity reflects the complexity and comprehensiveness of the concept of culture, a field that is always moving and developing. The concept of culture, in the scope of language and communication research, is defined by the author based on its manifest and hidden characteristics. Manifest values such as costumes, language, cuisine reflect the surface, while latent values such as beliefs, ethical standards, thinking and attitudes of the community create cultural depth. In particular, cross-cultural factors are often latent and abstract, making effective communication difficult. The concept of "cross-cultural" and its impact on foreign language learning need to be clarified. According to Kramsch (1998), cross-cultural is the contact between two cultures or languages from two different countries. Richards (1985) adds that intercultural communication is the exchange of information between individuals from different cultures, in which the interpretation of information depends on the individual's cultural context. Cultural differences pose a risk of misunderstanding, leading to communication failure, especially in specialized fields such as medicine, law, and politics.

2.2. The relationship between language and culture

Language, a cultural heritage inherited and spread through generations, is a means of transmitting cultural quintessence between people. The nature of language is not only a component of culture but also a tool for mediating, emanating and preserving cultural values. The use of language is a cultural behavior, naturally reflecting individual cultural identity. Conversely, cultural foundations also contribute to shaping language, expressed through the achievements, practices, visions, communities and people of a civilization (Moran, 2001). The relationship between language and culture is so complex and intimate that it cannot be separated without losing the inherent meaning of both (Emitt and Pollock, 2007). Learning a language means approaching and understanding the corresponding culture. Language acquisition requires a deep awareness of the cultural context surrounding it (Peterson & Coltrane, 2003). Therefore, in the process of teaching and learning language, a clear awareness of the organic relationship between language and culture is a key factor, contributing to improving effectiveness.

2.3. The need to teach culture in foreign language classrooms

The concept of foreign language learning includes many complex factors, intertwined between grammatical knowledge, fluent communication skills and deep understanding of native culture as well as foreign language culture. This awareness has motivated many language educators in recent years to focus on integrating cultural factors and cultural exchange into teaching methods. Researcher Seelye (1993) affirmed this importance in a concise but accurate way: "When teaching students, teach them about culture". Educational practice also demonstrates the effectiveness of integrating cultural elements into lectures, contributing to improving students' communication skills. Kramsch (1993) emphasized the fundamental role of culture in the foreign language learning process: Culture is not simply an additional skill alongside listening, speaking, reading, and writing, but is a key factor, clarifying the limits of communication, posing challenges for learners, and revealing the profound meaning of the world. The ability to communicate effectively in a foreign language depends not only on language proficiency, especially listening and speaking skills, but also requires a deep understanding of culture and a rich life experience. The communication process includes two important aspects: transmitting and receiving information. People use language, with its diverse symbol system, to convey information. However, receiving information requires the process of decoding those symbols, in order to ensure the correct understanding of the message being communicated. Both of these aspects are deeply influenced by culture. Cultural differences between the speaker and the listener can lead to incorrect decoding of information, causing misunderstandings and failure of the communication process. For example, the compliment "You are so sexy!" from an American man to a woman can be understood completely differently in Vietnamese culture. While it is considered a compliment in the West, the same words have an impolite implication in East Asian culture, which values women's modesty and elegance. This difference shows the importance of cultural understanding in the process of international communication. Therefore, integrating cultural knowledge into teaching activities requires attention to the following aspects: First, the attitude of respecting cultural diversity; second, the interactive

relationship between language and social structure; third, the cultural symbols behind the concepts; fourth, common communication behaviors; fifth, the function and meaning of cultural behaviors; sixth, the ability to evaluate social perspectives and conduct comparative cultural research. As Gaston (1984) pointed out, learners' acquisition and application of cross-cultural knowledge in communication not only broadens their understanding of other cultures but also contributes to deepening their understanding of national cultural identity.

2.4. Cultural teaching activities in foreign language teaching

Depending on the level and age of the learners, the following methods, flexibly adjusted, will effectively support the integration of culture into the foreign language teaching process: (1) Presentation and reading comprehension method: The teacher introduces cultural characteristics and differences from the learner's culture, or supplements relevant reading materials; (2) Group discussion method: The class is divided into small groups (3-4 people) to discuss cultural issues proposed by the teacher; (3) Problem-solving method: The teacher presents cultural situations, asks learners to analyze and propose individual solutions, then discusses in groups to reach a consensus (Henrichsen, 1998); (4) Cultural assimilation method: The teacher provides paragraphs describing cultural situations that are easily misunderstood. Learners choose the most appropriate answer and explain their choice; (5) Cultural illustration method (Cultoons): Similar to the cultural assimilation method, but using illustrations. Teachers prepare a series of pictures (4 pictures/series) showing situations of cultural misunderstanding. Students analyze the character's behavior and explain the cause of the misunderstanding (Henrichsen, 1998); (6) Role-playing method: This method is most effective after a conversation lesson. Students role-play a real-life communication situation related to culture, in order to enhance their ability to apply it in practice. For example, after learning how to address and call others by name, students can role-play a situation where someone calls someone by name inappropriately. Other students sit and observe and discover those mistakes. Implementing a diverse cultural teaching method, teachers apply many techniques to optimize the learning process. (6) The "Culture Capsules" method encourages students to briefly present cultural characteristics, comparing similarities and differences between the native culture and the culture being studied. Illustrations vividly complement the presentation, creating the premise for a lively discussion.; (7) Dramas simulate communication situations with potential cultural misunderstandings. Through acting, students directly experience, analyze the causes and together find solutions. (Huges, 1984; (8) "Visuals/media" play an essential role in teaching. Films, videos, magazines, and television programs provide rich, visual resources that are especially useful in conveying non-verbal elements such as gestures and expressions. (Peck, 1998, quoted in Fleet, n.d.; (9) "Audio-motor Units" require active interaction. Teachers give written or verbal instructions, and students practice and adjust their behavior accordingly. For example, should the act of waving to adults and children be different? (Huges, 1984; Henrichsen, 1998); (10) Analyzing "Idioms" helps clarify the similarities and differences between two cultures. Comparing idioms in the mother tongue and the language of study helps learners gain a deeper understanding of historical and cultural context; (11) "Ethnographic Studies" encourages students to participate directly in the community. Interviewing native speakers, taking notes,

recording or filming provides valuable data, helping students to have a genuine approach to the culture of the study and finally Quiz: An effective tool to assess knowledge and supplement cultural knowledge. Teachers can provide answers or guide students to find information from many sources, such as books, newspapers, television. The core value is not in the accuracy of the answer but in the process of searching, stimulating interest in learning. In fact, the method of teaching culture in a foreign language context is extremely diverse. Teachers possess many strategies and techniques to exploit the target cultural elements. However, the choice of method depends on the characteristics of each subject. Teachers need to carefully consider teaching objectives, including content, audience and timing, and then adjust and create their own methods to optimize the integration of cultural elements into lessons.

3. CONCLUSION

Implementing a foreign language education method that integrates cultural elements is a feasible and promising direction. Creating conditions for learners to role-play, act, experience listening and acting, or participate in activities to explore, solve problems, assimilate and present about culture, all effectively contribute to the formation of communication skills, which opens up new horizons about the country and culture of the language being learned. By highlighting the key role of culture in foreign language teaching and spending enough time on teaching culture, teachers can positively orient learners' attitudes towards foreign cultures. The necessity and feasibility of integrating culture into foreign language teaching programs are further affirmed when we clearly recognize its importance in building communication skills - the core goal of foreign language teaching. Effective communication skills not only require

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