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DEVELOPING CULTURAL SENSITIVITY IN EFL CLASSES

Learning a foreign language should not be viewed separately from learning culture(s) behind it. The ability to speak another language fluently does not guarantee an effective communication with the native speakers of the language. Therefore, culture studies should be made an inseparable part of foreign language courses. The paper calls attention to the need to encompass more cultural components into the EFL curricula. It examines some of the communication problems arising from intercultural ignorance and considers the cultural aspects to be covered and the ways of building cultural knowledge.

Key words: *EFL curricula, cultural (in)competence, communication problems, sources of error, components of culture, culture-related activities*

Learning culture of a target language has long been viewed as an integral part of a foreign language learning and acquisition. A whole body of research has been done in this area. Of particular interest are works by Milton J. Bennett, who has come up with the idea of “fluent fools”. The term suggests that even those communicating in a foreign language effortlessly may find themselves in culturally embarrassing situations because they often lack “some of the linguistic or behavioral skills of another culture” /Bennet, 2004: 6/. Another thought-provoking study, conducted by Lynn Visson /2005/, examined cultural blunders that Russian immigrants, business people and tourists make in their communication with Americans. All this research proves that foreign language training in various parts of the world does not always aim at raising learners’ sensitivity towards target cultures, which makes the learning outcomes poor and flawed.

This paper presents the empirical observations of Armenian students learning EFL and reflections on cultural manifestations in two nations, namely, Armenian and American. Some perceptible patterns of social and linguistic behaviour characteristic of the two cultures were regularly collected and recorded, and then a comparative-contrastive analysis was performed. I shall first analyze some of the undesirable effects of cultural incompetence on the English language production and reception. Further, I shall consider the range of cultural aspects to be covered and, finally, discuss some activities that directly or indirectly promote cultural literacy.

Impacts of cultural incompetence

As the leading linguist D. Crystal puts it, “language is the repository of the history of a people. It is their identity” /Crystal, 2003: 20/. Similarly, large groups of people are characterized by culture. It identifies their specific customs, beliefs, values, notions, attitudes and behaviours, expressed through the language they historically speak, as well as preserved when speaking another language. In fact, learners of a foreign language rely on their own native language- and culture-based thinking, thus complicating mutual understanding with native speakers. Language-based thinking is a product of culture. When learning a language in an environment cut-off from the cultural manifestations and the real meanings put in the words and phrases, learners have difficulty “thinking” in another language and have to base the intended ideas on native grammatical and lexical structures.

Considering Armenian bilingualism, language-based thinking in Armenian learners of English is manifested in the *lexical, grammatical* and *lexicogrammatical mistakes*. Some examples are presented in the table below:

	WHAT ARMENIANS SAY	INTERPRETATION
LEXICAL	<i>betray one’s spouse</i> <i>Saturday and Sunday</i> <i>rewrite at the exam</i> <i>run away from classes</i> <i>contain the family</i>	<i>cheat on one’s spouse</i> <i>weekend</i> <i>cheat at the exam</i> <i>play truant</i> <i>support, provide for the family</i>
GRAMMATICAL	Misuse of subject/object: <i>me like to read/reading</i> Misuse of passive structures: <i>In all world speak English.</i> <i>All over the world speak English.</i> <i>This article wrote a famous scientist.</i> Misuse of participles: <i>the recently happened terrorist act in Paris</i> Adjective/adverb misuse: <i>smell nicely</i>	<i>I like to read/reading</i> <i>English is spoken all over the world.</i> <i>This article was written by a famous scientist.</i> <i>the terrorist act that recently happened in Paris</i> <i>smell nice</i>
LEXICO-GRAMMATICAL	<i>under the rain</i> <i>exchange/share with smth.</i> <i>my watches are behind by 10 minutes</i>	<i>in the rain</i> <i>exchange/share smth.</i> <i>my watch is 10 minutes slow</i>

In fact, lexical mistakes are predominant among the errors caused by native language-based thinking.

Misunderstanding of polysemantic words and colloquial expressions is also common to Armenian students. For instance, the question “*What type of food do you have?*” can be replied with “Right now I have bread and cheese in the fridge.” The sentence “*I’m afraid the weather is not clear enough*” can leave a student wondering “But what is he afraid of?”

Another major impact of cultural incompetence (or neglect) can be seen in what I call *notional blunders* or *lapses*, i.e. in the subconscious substitution of certain foreign notions by ones rooted in the learners’ own linguoculture. For instance, when teaching the speaking section of the TOEFL iBT to Armenian students, I always observe their reluctance to use words “man” and “woman” instead of the habitual “boy” and “girl” to refer to the speakers, who are university students. In the mentality of many traditional Armenians, who stay in their parental home until marriage or even later, a person attending university is still viewed as a boy/girl to refer to the young age. Learners over 30 also stick to “boy” and “girl” in their answers, which probably stems from the fact that most Armenian parents keep viewing their offspring as children and protecting them throughout their lives. Another typical example is using the words “brother”/“sister” to refer to a cousin. Although both in Armenian and Russian there are exact equivalents for “cousin” (զարմիկ, двоюродный брат/двоюродная сестра respectively), both cultures reveal a strong tendency towards replacing them with “brother” and “sister” (եղբայր/քույր, брат/сестра) to subconsciously show the affinity and strong family ties.

A common cause of cultural misunderstanding is *unawareness of values of a nation* – material, moral, ethical and spiritual. A good example is the American bald eagle. To an Armenian, the bald eagle is just a predatory bird, while an American attaches a particular significance to it; it is not only a national symbol appearing on the U.S. Great Seal but also a symbol of grandeur, freedom, strength, honesty, courage, wisdom and power, and there is a long history behind choosing this bird as a symbol representing the young country. At the same time, the phrase should be used carefully as it can be a sexual taboo. Similarly, foreigners are puzzled at what makes rather boring baseball an American national pastime. In fact, this game has a great role in shaping the U.S. popular culture encouraging the creation of a great many songs, poems and traditions. American football is still another national favourite, while the rest of the world enjoys soccer. In a mixed marriage, a football fan’s wife can be insulted by her husband’s disregard of her throughout the football season, whereas American wives are accustomed to their husbands’ passion for this sport and jokingly call themselves “football widows”.

Cultural and social values are invariably expressed in the established *norms and behaviours* – a source of confusion for foreigners. The example of strangers smiling at each other or giving compliments on a fellow-passenger’s clothing item

in some U.S. states can serve best to illustrate the point. On the other end of the spectrum are cheerless Armenians, who rarely smile without a reason; however, the same Armenians stir foreigners with their willingness to move closer together to make room for others on the crowded public transport, or to yield the seat to senior fellow-passengers or offer the other standing passengers help with their heavy bags, or with their tendency (especially common to senior citizens) to address strangers by tender words like *ազիզ ջան, բալետ* meaning “my dear”, “darling”, “babe”. Alternatively, to Western nations, the Armenian manner of treating their guests to the meal can be perceived as somewhat importune, when the host is nearly “forcing” the guests to help themselves to the food. In contrast, an American host, respecting the guests’ eating habits, will simply leave it to their full discretion, which may be misinterpreted by Armenians as “indifferent” and inhospitable.

If we care not to sour relations with our foreign acquaintances or create a negative image of our compatriots, it is also vital to be aware of *social taboos*. For example, an Armenian asking in fluent and polite English to jump the queue in England will irritate the locals, for whom queuing is a standard practice and everyone’s time is respected. Similarly, in western countries asking personal questions (about the size of wages, weight and diet) should be avoided as these topics are seen as strictly private. But Armenians, as a high-context culture (in which personal relationships are very deep and intimate), can sometimes be very intrusive into others’ privacy.

The effects of cultural ignorance may extend far beyond misunderstanding and embarrassment; it may completely destroy the relationships between people. Hence, it is always purposeful to familiarize oneself with the rules of acceptable behaviour before starting an interaction in a strange cultural environment.

Which components of culture should be taught?

Many norms and behaviours which were historically alien to Armenians are gradually becoming acceptable due to globalization, social media and the increased mobility. There is a greater tendency of observing other nations’ holidays (Halloween, Valentine’s Day), borrowing other peoples’ social traditions and customs (especially wedding customs), adopting a more liberal standpoint on traditional approaches and moving away from old conventions (women working outside home). This fact can potentially reconcile differences, reduce misunderstanding and promote tolerance between nations. Culture, however, is such an immense sphere that it is hardly possible to perceive completely. The impact that culture has on language is profound too, but even culture-based language education cannot cover absolutely every aspect of it. An important question arises then. Which aspects of culture should be focused on?

The boundless concept of culture includes by conventional definition such closely intertwined components as societal norms and standards of behaviour, material, moral, ethical and spiritual values, peculiarities of language use,

traditions, customs, rituals, holidays, cuisine, humour, institutions, symbols, landmarks, arts, architecture, national traits and their determiners, among them geography, history and religion. This is by no means an exhaustive list. However, it gives a constructive idea about how a culture-sensitive language syllabus can be designed. An elaborate and balanced combination of linguistic and cultural information not only ensures a comprehensive language education but also makes the learning process more attractive to students and can stimulate interactive tasks for recreating practical communicative situations.

Because you cannot obviously teach everything about all cultures, it is expedient to broadly group some cultures together by similarities they share, like language, religion, geographical position, history, etc. One way to group countries is by *culture dimensions*. Despite the existence of various theories on national culture (topped by models of Geert Hofstede and Fons Trompenaars), for EFL purposes I find it appropriate to limit myself to individualistic or collectivistic, high power distance or low power distance, low-context or high-context cultures /Adams, Galanes, 2003: 203/.

Depending on the objectives of the class and students' ability, I can choose to present a brief overview of these or prepare and coordinate a role-play or simulation where small groups of students will each represent a different type of culture in a variety of situations. Even a brief introduction can communicate the learners a clear idea about these major cultural divides. Having an idea about individualist and collectivist cultures, students can discuss such national features as competition and cooperation, comparing and contrasting the examples of Armenia, Russia and other countries. Thus, to foreign visitors Armenians can seem collectivist due to our helpfulness and hospitality, propensity to lend support to strangers, intimate connection with neighbours, and employee referrals. Nonetheless, we are distinctly an individualistic nation, which is displayed in our international success in individual rather than team sports, our reluctance to collaborate in groups and many other instances. This ambivalent, uniquely Armenian form of individualism does not rule out reliance on other people. Thus, Armenians tend to share their joys and sorrows with friends and family, who are willing to listen and help. Attending a psychoanalyst is believed to be shameful, something to be avoided or kept secret. In contrast, to individualistic westerners attending a psychoanalyst is common practice. Although family and friendship are valued and may be helpful as well, it is not customary to burden others with one's problems.

Another controversy is seen in mutual assistance during exams, which persists in Armenia despite the fact that classroom competition has become a widespread norm in recent decades. When continuing education abroad, many Armenian students find it hard to become self-reliant and adjust to intensely competitive individualistic cultures at Western European and American universities, where such assistance is perceived as cheating.

As regards linguistic expressions of individualism versus collectivism, emphasizing one's authorship or contribution to scientific research has been a norm for individualistic cultures, while in post-Soviet nations, including Armenia, it is considered appropriate to address oneself collectively, using "we" instead of "I". Today, many scholars in Armenia still adhere to this rule.

Similar case studies can be conducted by the teacher or students themselves concerning the other dimensions. In particular, it is crucial for Armenians learning English to be aware of the differences in the modes of communicating messages. With our culture being *high-context*, we often speak tactfully and express ideas indirectly caring not to insult people. It does not even occur to us that our message can be simply misinterpreted or taken at face value by other nations. When we say "I'll think about it", it most probably means we shall hardly do it and hope the interlocutor forgets about it too. Conversely, when the *low-context cultures* like the British or Americans say something, they usually mean it, and we Armenians lean over backwards seeking additional connotations in their messages. Moreover, our views are predominantly past-oriented and we often think negatively, while Americans have an optimistic outlook on life and the future.

Within the scope of the current study, I shall further focus on purely linguistic expressions of culture, explore the existing methods of overcoming the differences and outline some novel solutions.

Methods and activities embracing specific components of culture

Interactive methods of language teaching, which are gaining popularity with the linguistic community of Armenia, do not always work wonders as might be expected. In the absence of authentic linguistic and cultural surroundings, where students would reiteratively use the memorized structures for their cognitive purposes, it is hard to develop their ability to "feel" the language and think in it. On the other hand, wide access to the Internet, YouTube, social media, chats, smart phone applications open up fresh opportunities for "*virtual*" *mobility*. These channels have been successfully utilized in multimedia classrooms for some time now. Considering the lack of appropriate equipment in Armenian universities, some language teachers handle the issue by means of personal gadgets. But especially heartening is the fact that through virtual mobility students can pick up cultural information by reading, listening, sharing, exchanging, participating in forums and doing other voluntary activities on their own pace and beyond the classroom.

Turning to traditional teaching methods, it is worth mentioning the *grammar translation approach*. Despite the widespread idea that this method is ineffective and should be discarded, I would stand up for it. Admittedly, using interactive methods in a country where the target language is not spoken may be indispensable to help acquire some communicative competence. Allowing significant grammatical inaccuracy, such a learning outcome may be acceptable if a learner's aim is merely to communicate in a foreign language, but just that much. When

travelling, these learners may find themselves comfortable asking for directions and satisfying other cognitive needs. But will they be able to take any standardized tests without proficiency in grammar or by using low-range vocabulary? Will they succeed in studying in an English-language university and gaining deep knowledge? Scientists with communicative competence in English might be able to present the results of their innovative research to the international community at an international conference, but will they manage to write a publishable scientific paper themselves?

Evidently, grammar needn't be emphasized in the embryonic stage of language learning. On later stages, however, I reckon translation can even be quite beneficial to developing sensitivity to linguistic and cultural differences, as well as similarities, providing the teacher clearly outlines these in the structures used. When choosing the teaching approaches, individual learning styles should be taken into account as well. No method can work flawlessly with everyone. Younger learners, for example, tend to be more receptive to interactive methods, but among older ones many seek to analyze and understand the logic behind each grammatical structure, drawing comparisons with the native language structures. So it is often practically impossible to break this dependence on the mother tongue. To gain maximum results, the best approach at all levels is to combine the two methods as required, with a varying degree of emphasis on each. This will maximize the opportunity of correct language usage.

When conversational fluency is to be developed or reinforced, the following approaches should prevail. Rather than having students memorize rules and texts, assign them to role-play authentic dialogues highlighting conversational formula. These will familiarize learners with the functional language and cultural characteristics of conversing in various social situations. Rather than allowing students to cram texts (which is what most Armenian students do), encourage them to describe the ideas they picked up. Instead of translating sentences, have them render the meaning. Rather than giving them lengthy exercises for homework, have them read authentic (but abridged and adapted) books and watch authentic cartoons or movies (followed by classroom discussions). Have them communicate (verbally or in writing) with other native speakers. In the hi-tech age one can easily find native speakers willing to assist learners in acquiring their language through language exchange Apps like *Tandem* and *Bilingua*. Yet, the teacher preserves the essential role of guiding the students through the language use in social situations other than informal chats.

A special mention is to be made of *vocabulary*. Two typical mistakes that many Armenian students make are translating words outside the context and an improper use of a dictionary. It is vital to teach them how to look for word meanings. Firstly, discourage your students from depending on electronic translators. Get the message across to them that language learning does take a lot of time, and looking up a word in the dictionary is one of the most time-consuming

actions in this process. English word meanings depend on the context. So have them translate or understand the words while reading, not afterwards. Secondly, providing they already have a certain baggage of vocabulary, encourage them to work out the meanings without referring to a dictionary. Verify how they have mastered the new vocabulary through sentences of their own. And lastly, encourage your students to focus on collocations rather than separate words.

Turning back to *audiovisual activities* (watching and discussing movies, videos and audio-recordings), we should acknowledge their indispensable role in developing not only the verbal aspect of language but non-verbal communication as well. Through these audiovisual aids learners pick up the subliminal message of gestures, facial expressions, intonation, social rules such as proximity and touch, and other culture-related facts. On one occasion, describing her favourite movie a student of mine called it “The President’s Airplane” to refer to Harrison Ford’s 1997 movie “Air Force One”. She was obviously relying on the back translation of the original title. Had she watched the film in the source language, she would have learnt that the official aircraft carrying the U.S. President is named *Air Force One*. In fact, the Russian or Armenian versions of the title («Самолет президента» and «Նախագահի ինքնաթիռը» respectively) are ambiguous, also meaning a private aircraft belonging to a president, but in view of the absence of a corresponding term like the English one, the explanatory translation was given preference.

Another important component of linguoculture to pay attention to is *humour*. It is common knowledge that every nation has a sense of humour, but we all laugh at different things. The English are said to be very proud of their sense of humour, and not to laugh at their jokes will mean to give them offence. So to learners of English, understanding English humour is absolutely essential. Of special attention in a language class is verbal humour – *jokes* and *riddles* based on the *pun*. Thus, to familiarize my students with the English humour, I spare 5 minutes of the lesson time on a regular basis to hold riddle quizzes. At first, they find it difficult to guess them: it takes time to adapt to different mentality. Drawing comparisons with Armenian and Russian puns is helpful in clarifying the nature of these jokes. Sooner or later students start to “see the light”, and the activity becomes one of the most enjoyable tasks.

Next, such aspects of language as *idioms*, *proverbs* and *sayings* become the biggest source of mistakes for a language learner as they are primary indicators of a nation’s mentality. These expressions of popular wisdom can best be taught by means of *visual aids*, especially *cartoons* and *caricatures* illustrating the direct and metaphorical meanings of the expressions. Caricatures are particularly effective when the images in the target and source languages are completely divergent (cf. a red herring – отвлекающий манёвр – ուշադրություն շեղելու հնարք) or if the concept expressed in the idiom does not exist in the native language(s). Idioms are more easily remembered if the images in respective languages overlap (cf. have second thoughts – засомневаться, передумать – երկմտել, միտքը փոխել) and

if the metaphor is partly or fully motivated (e.g., golden handcuffs). As an alternative, students can be encouraged to suggest their own equivalent translations. Traditional follow-up exercises, such as inserting a missing component, matching the two parts and making up sentences with the idioms, also arouse students' interest. However, students remember best through *etymological analyses* and thus become exposed to various historic events which help to understand why and when certain idioms can be used and when they should be avoided as taboo expressions (e.g., Indian giving /AmE/). In fact, teaching idioms also implies discussing other components of culture, namely, history, climate, sports and cuisine, as many expressions are borrowed from these fields and get a new meaning.

In addition to the abovementioned approaches applied in teaching specific cultural aspects, I propose engaging students in the following activities:

- **Culture quizzes.** Some interesting quizzes are available in authentic English textbooks. However, the teacher can compile or design his or her own quizzes adapted to the students' learning needs, interests and abilities. Here are some sample topics: What type of culture do you belong to? How would you cope around the world? Distinguishing the four cultures on the British Isles. Cultural diversity of the U.S.A. The last topic, for example, can also be used to introduce subcultures living in the States, such as Native Americans, the Amish, and others.
- **Story-telling.** Students love narratives. Telling them stories from your personal experience of communicating cross-culturally and sharing your cultural lapses can be a rewarding activity. Allow them to share their own experiences as well. This will reveal distinct and sometimes mistaken impressions and viewpoints that should be studied more carefully. Beware of stereotyping. People can be different even when sharing the same national culture.
- **Drawing comparisons.** Compare students' own culture with other cultures. This technique is particularly successful in multicultural classes, where cultural exchange should be encouraged. As more and more of our compatriots are returning to Armenia and more foreign students choose to study here, the phenomenon of multicultural student-groups is becoming common.
- **Using schemes.** Explain verb tenses schematically. Comparisons with the Armenian or Russian tense systems can be useful in giving a general idea of different tenses in English but they are insufficient in explaining more specific and untranslatable instances.
- **Solving logic brain teasers.** These are amusing and learner-friendly ways to foster critical thinking skills and attention to detail. They are also effective in stimulating learners' ability to think in the target language, as the solution can be reached through the skill of reading between the lines. One popular website offering logic puzzles of varying level of ability is <https://www.brainzilla.com/logic/logic-grid/musical-instruments/>.

- *Integrating knowledge from various sources.* Available in print or online, model TOEFL and IELTS essays provide firsthand examples and situations from the writers' experiences where they unintentionally reveal the cultural characteristics of their respective countries. Likewise, campus-related talks in the listening section expose listeners to university culture, as well as increase their pragmatic understanding of conversations.

Final Implications

Evidently, the EFL classes cannot make it an ultimate goal to discover all the ins and outs of the target cultures. What this study aims at is to alert language teachers and learners to be more consistent in exploring cultures in the classroom and outside it. To succeed in cross-cultural relations, whether for personal goals or for work, it is essential to be culturally knowledgeable. After all, culture studies promote mutual respect, help reconcile and appreciate the differences, which is vital in the age of globalization.

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Մ. ԿԱՐԱՊԵՏՅԱՆ – Մշակութային իրազեկության զարգացումը անգլերենի որպես օտար լեզվի դասընթացներին. – Սույն հոդվածում քննարկվում է անգլերենի ուսումնական ծրագրերում մշակութային տեղեկատվություն ներառելու կարևորությունը: Օտար լեզվի տիրապետումը չի երաշխավորում այդ լեզվի կրողների հետ արդյունավետ հաղորդակցում: Այդ նպատակին հասնելու համար անհրաժեշտ է լեզվական գիտելիքների հետ մեկտեղ ուսումնասիրել տվյալ

մշակույթի առանձնահատկությունները: Ուստի, ուսումնասիրվող մշակույթի ուսուցումը պետք է կազմի օտար լեզվի դասընթացների անբաժան մասը: Հոդվածում վեր են հանվել միջմշակութային անհրազեկությունից բխող հաղորդակցական որոշ խնդիրներ, մշակույթը փոխանցելու և համապատասխան գիտելիքներ զարգացնելու մեթոդներ:

Բանալի բառեր. անգլերենի ուսումնական ծրագրեր, մշակութային /անհրազեկություն, հաղորդակցման խնդիրներ, սխալների պատճառներ, մշակույթի բաղադրիչներ, մշակութային իրազեկության զարգացման մեթոդներ

М. КАРАПЕТЯН – Развитие культурной компетенции на уроках английского языка как иностранного. – Умение свободно говорить на иностранном языке не гарантирует эффективного общения с носителями данного языка. Для этого необходимо понимание культурных особенностей соответствующих стран. В статье подчеркивается важность включения культурологической информации в программы обучения английского языка как иностранного. Исследуются некоторые проблемы коммуникации, возникающие вследствие межкультурной некомпетентности. Рассматриваются вопросы подбора и изучения определенных аспектов культуры, а также способы приобретения культурных знаний.

Ключевые слова: программы обучения английского языка, культурная (не)компетентность, проблемы коммуникации, причины ошибок, компоненты культуры, задания по развитию культурной компетенции

Ներկայացվել է՝ 27.02.2019
Երաշխավորվել է ԵՊՀ Անգլերենի թիվ 2 ամբիոնի կողմից
Ընդունվել է տպագրության՝ 25.04.2019