

Рутковська О.М.

Науковий керівник - кандидат педагогічних наук,

доцент Коноваленко Т.В.

WORKING WITH ELT MATERIALS ON INTERCULTURAL ISSUES

***Abstract.** In foreign language education, the theory of intercultural competence comes to the foreground in the last 20 years. This attributed importance to culture has carried new demands with it for foreign language teachers. It is of importance to determine the place of culture in the curriculum through examining what is taught and what methods and strategies are used in teaching culture in English as a foreign language (EFL) classes. This study suggests that the integration of culture into language teaching is a must; however, because of time constraints and excessive requirements of syllabi, it does not yet have a distinguished position in foreign language (FL) education in Ukraine.*

***Key words:** ELT materials, intercultural teaching; foreign language teaching; intercultural competence, culture.*

Researchers have emphasized the significance of culture as a key feature, which must go hand in hand with language teaching and have come up with various definitions of culture throughout years. One of the definitions comes from Brislin [2]. He defined culture as “widely shared ideals, values, formation and uses of categories, assumptions about life, and goal-directed activities that become unconsciously or subconsciously accepted as “right” or “correct” by people who identified themselves as members of a society”. Furthermore as Clayton (2003) states, culture is the root of our identity which is pervasive, shared, learned and dynamic. Similarly, in her definition Nieto also sees culture as a dynamic entity, and highlights the nature of it as multifaceted, embedded in context, influenced by social, economic and political factors, and socially constructed, learned and dialectical [7].

At this point, the thing that counts is to recognize the reciprocal relationship between language and culture. As a result of this relationship, culture teaching has gained importance in foreign language teaching (FLT), especially in the field of

English language teaching (ELT). Thus, culture teaching should be paid special attention in EFL curriculum together with the necessary methods and techniques to be applied in the classroom. All these factors combined to provide a motive for this study aimed to find out whether teachers are aware of how, when and to what extent they exploit culture in their English language classes. In this sense, this paper also aims to explore the type and the amount of cultural information to be transmitted in ELT classes. The materials and strategies implemented in this transmission are also the areas to be dealt with.

On that account, it is possible to note that the idea of intercultural learning came to light in the 1990s, and as Risager states, with the introduction of intercultural learning to the FL study, teaching cultural differences and using the target language worldwide became more important [3].

The shift in the education system and society in general, goes hand in hand with the shift particularly in the culture teaching area, which is towards postmodernism combining the old and the new. With this shift, learning methods and strategies, learner differences, experiences, attitudes and emotions, and recognizing “the other” have been given priority. In other words, instead of the cognitive dimension the affective dimension has become more prominent.

To sum up, FL teaching today is based on the objectives of making the learners familiar with the target culture(s) by providing them with general background information, preparing them for future intercultural situations by giving them social and sociolinguistic skills, as well as promoting empathy, open-mindedness and respect for otherness, by working against stereotypes and prejudiced views of other cultures.

To explore how and why foreign language teachers develop intercultural competence the following research questions were formulated:

1. How do EFL teachers define culture?
2. What purposes and anticipated outcomes in culture teaching are indicated more by EFL teachers?

3. What materials and strategies do EFL teachers use to promote intercultural competence in their classes?

4. Is there a specific reason that makes EFL teachers ignore culture teaching in their classes?

From the classroom practice point of view, the main tendency seemed to be exploiting cultural information based on both target and local grounds when teaching a FL. However, there is still a preference for the use of local culture elements as the starting point which might be explained by providing familiar and appropriate contexts to speed up the learning process so that learners do not feel intimidated from the beginning. The fact that local culture is generally taken as the starting point can also be explained by the convenience and safety it provides where they can feel free to comment on and give examples about. Concerning the integration of examples from target and local cultures into the language teaching practice, some EFL instructors aimed to impose a general crosscultural perspective, intercultural awareness, and the ability to compare local culture with target culture on learners.

As a result of the analysis of the teachers' interview data, it is possible to conclude that all the interviewees are aware of the importance of integrating culture in FL classes by using a variety of strategies and materials. However, they also state that mostly they have to stick to the textbook and activities in the textbook, which are ready-made, as they have very limited time to treat cultural issues in class because of the excessive requirements of the syllabi.

Thus, they are able to allocate more time to grammar teaching rather than culture teaching. These results are consistent with a number of studies, which have also found out that in general FL teachers devote minimum amount of time to culture teaching.

Therefore, apart from the linguistic dimension, a more sophisticated cultural component with its carefully designed teaching methods and techniques should be added to the FLT curriculum so that it could be taught in an integrated way. This component is also crucial to support learners in raising their cultural awareness,

adopting feelings like empathy and tolerance, showing respect to other cultures, widening their perspectives and appreciating similarities and differences among cultures.

In other words, intercultural activities and courses must be given the same importance in the curriculum as well as the other language activities.

Accordingly, textbooks should be organized in a way that cultural items along with the linguistic dimension should be equally benefited from. They should provide the learner with equal opportunities to compare his own culture with others and promote cross-cultural understanding. For this reason, it is recommended that EFL materials should be selected in such a way that they encourage an intercultural point of view.

Finally, in order to draw FL instructors' attention more to culture teaching and improve their related knowledge regarding this issue, teacher training courses or professional development activities including necessary culture teaching methods and techniques should be organized. These courses and activities should lead EFL teachers to realize that developing intercultural competence, empathy and respect towards others, and knowing more about "the other" are not something to be ignored but welcomed.

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