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USING CULTURE AS THE FIFTH LANGUAGE SKILL TO ENHANCE MILITARY STUDENTS' EFL COMPETENCE

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ABSTRACT

Is there a connection between language and culture? If so, what is the role of culture in language classrooms at a military academy? Why should we teach a set of cultural skills as part of EFL instruction? Can culture be considered the fifth language skill in addition to speaking, writing, listening, and reading? This paper aims to provide answers to these questions and while it attempts to present a series of practical examples on how to include culture in EFL classes, it is limited to a brief description of each. The fact that it is often difficult to simply translate one language into another is one of the primary reasons behind the concept of teaching culture alongside language. The present paper provides language teachers with reasons and suggestions for emphasizing the significance of teaching culture to military students.

KEYWORDS: culture, EFL, English language teaching, fifth language skill

1. Introduction

It goes without saying that culture and language are intertwined since people's interpretations of the world around them are influenced by their cultural upbringing and behaviors. The ability to communicate cross-culturally is subsequently viewed as a successful skill that can be created through cross-cultural awareness. According to Hong (2008), teachers should focus on developing both linguistic and cultural competencies while teaching a foreign language because this allows learners to use the target language appropriately. Keeping these points in mind, let's take a look at the connection between culture and language and, of course, how culture is incorporated into language classes.

2. Language and Culture

What is culture?

It is difficult to define culture. Due to its broad scope and multifaceted nature, the world's dictionaries offer a plethora of definitions for this phenomenon. For the most part, it is accepted that culture comprises of essential presumptions, values, examples of conduct, mentalities, and convictions of a specific group, typically limited to a specific region. Culture is passed down from one generation to the next and it can be argued that it is continually shaped by every one of the individuals who share it. Culture and language are intertwined because it is impossible to comprehend a culture without its language.

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Language as part of culture

Language is a way of communication between people, and it is made up of sounds and written components. Because it has a specific set of characters, rules, grammar, and other features, language appears to be more like an exact science. Culture, on the other hand, is less material than language. However, there are numerous connections between culture and language. When people learn a new language, they frequently visit countries, read authentic texts, and converse with native speakers, they read about the country and its traditions. Culture and language always go hand in hand and having a holistic approach ensures successful language acquisition and efficient communication in the target language.

According to the linguistic relativity principle proposed by Edward Sapir in 1929, the language we use to talk about the world has a direct impact on how we think about the world. The American linguist holds that the language habits of the group that an individual is part of represent the building blocks of how people perceive the world. Since languages are not completely similar, societies and their perception of the world become different.

The question that needs to be answered is whether a foreign language can be learned without learning the culture. The answer is that, if one wants to use a foreign language effectively, then culture should also be learnt. Language and culture need to be tackled together to create competent learners in a second language. It is necessary to impart the cultural knowledge associated with English, especially since educators ought to manage it as the *fifth language skill*. This happens mainly because the English language has an international role, and it has become a core communicative skill. Samovar (2015) accurately points to the fact that *"cross-cultural awareness and intercultural communication competence are daily necessities"*. EFL (English as a Foreign Language) professionals have lately argued that the English language cannot be seen as an isolated entity and should not be presented in classrooms as disconnected from its cultural background.

Many would assume that learning a foreign language implicitly means learning its culture. What I have observed from practice is that, while studying English as a foreign language, students indeed learn a multitude of cultural components specific to English-speaking countries, but they do not necessarily become aware of how to use them to appropriately behave in certain situations triggered by particular cultural contexts. Culture as the fifth language skills helps students to appreciate the distinctive characteristics of other cultures and, more importantly, to acknowledge and accept differences, as well as to become tolerant of practices that are unlike their own. Thus, learning culture involves a shift in mentality that is communicated precisely through the target language.

3. Teaching Culture to Military Cadets

What is the rationale for educating cadets who are culturally competent and linguistically appropriate?

English language and culture are integral to enabling effective communication and fostering multiculturalism within NATO as it serves as the official and working language of communication and business. It is used for official documents, meetings, conferences, and it makes it possible for representatives to work together effectively. English proficiency is essential for collaboration within the Alliance since it facilitates clear and efficient communication among member countries. NATO comprises a series of member countries with diverse cultures, traditions, and languages, hence the necessity of developing English proficiency both for personnel and for those participating in

international military exercises and operations in order to allow for seamless cooperation among the multinational staff and to facilitate the decision-making process. The English language, which is commonly understood by representatives from diverse linguistic backgrounds, serves as a bridge, allowing the exchange of ideas, sharing information and the successful coordination of military operations.

As Romania is part of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, the need for educating culturally competent and linguistically proficient officers is paramount, and the most persuasive argument to support English cultural and linguistic proficiency includes the importance of effective communication in English to ensure efficient cooperation and understanding among the diverse NATO workforce.

During the past years, cross-cultural environments have become crucial for military success. In the military, English language and culture play an important role, particularly during multinational operations, peacekeeping missions, and deployments to foreign countries or when interacting with foreign military personnel. EFL training and cultural understanding enable military personnel to communicate effectively, bridge cultural gaps, and build relationships in multinational and cross-cultural contexts. By promoting the development of English language skills and cultural sensitivity, the military aims to enhance cooperation, mission success, mitigate cultural misunderstandings, and achieve mission objectives.

In today's global operating environment, it is of utmost importance for Romanian cadets to develop cultural capabilities and clearly conceptualize them. Teaching language and culture to military students in an EFL class requires an integrated approach that focuses both on practical communication skills and cultural awareness. EFL training is a very important part of military students' training as it promotes cultural understanding and cross-cultural communication and it helps foster effective communication and cooperation between military forces as well as mutual respect.

The reality in our academy has pointed us to the fact that, in order to develop a comprehensive tool for teaching language and culture, it is important to identify the competencies that prove critical for both language and cultural proficiency. In our view, this model should include key competency domains, such as acquiring and systematizing linguistic and cultural knowledge, adapting to the cultural and linguistic contexts and diversity of the individuals and communities served, and the ability to work in cross-cultural situations.

Despite the NATO regulatory framework, it is difficult and time-consuming to identify the right tools for training cadets that are both linguistically and culturally proficient in English. As previously mentioned, the syntagm does not have a standard definition, neither have the criteria that determine whether a cadet is culturally competent been adequately outlined. Even though information related to cultural competencies is abundant, teachers of English oftentimes find it difficult to determine which is the most efficient strategy and this is simply because there has not been enough research conducted in the area of cultural training for cadets.

According to USCENTCOM Commander Gen. Norman Schwarzkopf, soldiers capable of using both language and cultural skills in military operations could be described as "critical force multipliers" in warfare situations (Quiller, 2022). As a result of the present-day international situation, it could be argued that all service members should be able to swiftly transition from one culturally complex situation to another while dealing with challenges from across cultures. This requires the creation of programs that are focused on developing military students'

intercultural competence. Through EFL learning, cadets should be able not only to become proficient in using English in real life situations but also to display cross-cultural adaptability which would later help them improve interoperability across all military operations. Cultural education should be intertwined with English language learning in an accessible manner with the aim to provide quick baseline knowledge. It is essential for the EFL teacher to create a learning environment that is both comprehensive and engaging while teaching military students both language and culture. Language teachers should take into consideration some of the following strategies in order to accomplish this:

●*Organizing activities that include a cultural competency component*

Integrating English language instruction with cultural content relevant to the military context facilitates not only language learning but it also offers cultural insights that allow military students to equip themselves with the necessary skills and language competencies that would ultimately lead them to actively participate in effective communication and collaboration in military settings. Integrating a cultural component in language learning activities allows the teacher to explain the students what the culturally appropriate use of language is (including the use of idioms, colloquial expressions and gestures commonly used in English-speaking countries). Consequently, military students acquire knowledge that helps them avoid miscommunication or potential cultural misunderstandings. Discussions that encourage students to share insights about their own culture and the culture of English-speaking countries ought to be the primary focus of activities that include a cultural competency component. These discussions should also serve to foster an understanding of the similarities and differences that exist between cultures. The cross-cultural interaction in this case can be achieved through simulations and role-plays.

●*Using authentic materials*

Students can be exposed to English language through the use of authentic materials such as news articles, videos, podcasts etc. These materials allow students to analyze and discuss communication styles, cultural nuances, and idiomatic expressions. When teaching military students, language instructors should take into account authentic materials derived from military sources, i.e., military publications, speeches, or other military online resources such as official army websites. Authentic materials from military sources expose students to military-specific vocabulary, idioms, and communication styles, thus enhancing their military English language skills and familiarity with the military discourse.

Hong (2008) suggests that it is important for language instructors to use literary texts when teaching culture as they include valuable cultural information of the target language. Through this type of text, students develop cultural awareness and intercultural skills that enable them to grasp the meaning of certain cultural norms, which is directly related to becoming successful in the target language.

Another strategy that EFL teachers could capitalize on while teaching culture is bringing native speakers into the classroom. Native speakers perform as cultural resources that can provide valuable cultural insight at the same time enabling students to observe how language is used spontaneously.

●*Project-based learning*

Both language and culture comprehension can be enhanced through assigning cultural projects either to individual students or to designated groups. Cultural presentations and projects should require students to research and present on specific English-speaking countries or regions in order to encourage them to explore not only specific aspects of language, historical events and cultural practices, but also to foster their cultural understanding of regional security

and dynamics. Project-based learning promotes independent learning and critical thinking, and it allows students to develop their collaborative skills while deepening their understanding of the subject matter. By learning about the cultural norms and values that are associated with English-speaking countries, military students develop their cultural intelligence and this, in turn, will later help them adapt their language and behavior in multicultural military environments.

Language is likewise viewed as a culture-explicit capability. According to Abbe & Halpin (2010), culture-specific knowledge is valuable because it is immediately applicable to deploying units, so project-based learning offers teachers the possibility to create a practical and immersive classroom environment that allows for the practice and development of English language skills. Undergoing both language and cultural EFL training offers military students the opportunity to enhance their language proficiency and to operate in multinational environments, skills that are relevant to their future deployments or assignments. Thus, they can effectively communicate with NATO partners and contribute to the objectives of collective defense and security of the alliance. Gaining skills in cross-cultural communication allows military students to develop their ability to navigate linguistic and cultural differences when interacting with English-speaking military personnel or successfully participating in multinational military operations.

●*Assessment*

Evaluation should be designed in such a way that it provides feedback for both components, namely English language proficiency and cultural understanding. Objective and accurate assessment provides the students with essential knowledge about their overall progress and allows them to actively participate in further classroom activities that promote language learning and cultural understanding.

4. Conclusions

The problem that most EFL teachers face is that they usually have to focus on the linguistic aspects rather than on integrating cultural elements, mainly because they have to prepare students for exams that do not commonly subsume a cultural component. It is essential that teachers and language instructors provide both linguistic input and comprehensive cultural situations that the students can engage with while learning English. Thus, students will become capable of acknowledging the significance of culture when confronted with real-life scenarios that are representative of the reality outside of the language classroom. Rappel's (2011) explanation is relevant in this sense. She suggests that *"appreciating a plural linguistic environment encourages respect and tolerance for cultural diversity both inside and outside the classroom"*, meaning that, by acquiring culture as the fifth language skill, students become more open-minded and adaptable. The author also suggests that teachers should not focus exclusively on helping learners achieve native-like proficiency but on their *ability* to use culture as a language skill to operate with meaning and to correctly interpret it.

Culture cannot be comprehended without having direct access to its language; in the same way, learning a foreign language cannot be successful unless it encompasses the ability to understand cultural references, which means that culture becomes the reference point of language interactions. Consequently, learning a new language does not imply only learning the alphabet, grammar rules, expressions, and word meanings, but also the way people adhere to cultural norms and how they behave according to these. It is our belief that language teachers and instructors should always make some specific reference to the culture that goes along with the English language when teaching it.

To conclude, it is easy to observe the importance of teaching culture and language together. A language learner's ability to communicate effectively in the target language does not necessarily depend on their exhaustive grammatical development. Being communicatively competent in English means being both linguistically and culturally competent, and it is our duty as language teachers to ensure that our students become successful in using language in the broader context of the culture that incorporates it.

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