



**International
Journal of Society, Culture & Language
IJSCL**

Journal homepage: www.ijsc.net
ISSN 2323-2210 (online)

Introducing Culturally-Adaptive English Language Pedagogy (CELP): Integrating Critical Cultural Awareness through the ‘little-c’ Culture in Iran’s EFL Curriculum

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ARTICLE HISTORY:

Received April 2014
Received in revised form July 2014
Accepted July 2014
Available online July 2014

KEYWORDS:

Critical Culture awareness
Little-c culture
L2 pedagogy
Teaching culture
Iran’s EFL curriculum

Abstract

In teaching a foreign language (FL), some cultural specificities (defined under the rubric of ‘little-c culture’) may totally conflict with the cultural norms of the learners’ first language (L1). To prevent such imminent problems, this paper recommended that the FL syllabus be designed in a way so as to equip learners with an intimate knowledge of the target language culture, and that language teachers should develop consciousness toward learners’ cultural fragility and explicitly make full use of a culturally relevant FL pedagogy in a procedural, technical fashion which we shall refer to as *Culturally-adaptive English Language Pedagogy (CELP)*. Such a syllabus would help learners not only to welcome the legitimacy of differences between the two cultures, but also to make their own cultural values and practices more explicit, enfranchising learners the decision on what aspects of cultural practices they want to embrace. We address three questions of *what* (the characterization of CELP), *why* (the significance of CELP) and *how* (the implementation of CELP) in the peculiar EFL context of Iran.

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1. Introduction

Teaching and learning culture has been a matter of considerable interest to the field of L2 pedagogy and much has been discussed over the past two decades on the role that culture plays in FL instruction (Byram & Morgan, 1994). It is now well accepted that knowing a language comprises not only knowledge of the grammar, vocabulary, or phonology of that language but also the particular cultural aspects and characteristics (Krasner, 1999). So, confronting a foreign culture is regarded as a kind of dialogue and part of a communicative process which affects learners in a dialectic interdependence whereby meaning needs to be negotiated. Culture is therefore considered to be “a dynamic and not as a static entity” (Fenner & Newby, 2000, p. 149). Raising the cultural awareness of FL learners seems to serve as the ‘hidden curriculum’ of FL teaching (Calvert, 1999). Nonetheless, given that a learner’s view of a culture cannot be based on the teaching and learning of the foreign language per se, one should not underrate the emerging need for raising cultural awareness among learners (Crawshaw, 2005; Dlaska, 2000).

According to Kumaravadivelu (2003), teaching English (as a predominant language) worldwide has empowered some visions of life over others, thus giving precedence to certain ways of citing and creating knowledge, commercializing an ethnocentric cultural model to pursue, and granting many people the right to cross boundaries in a hierarchical capitalist society providing them with the required cultural capital to ascend (Bourdieu, 1986). Therefore, FL learning seems to be considered less as the development of particular skills, and more as empowering the foreign language learners to react linguistically and culturally in an appropriate manner in communication situations which are not predetermined. Learning a foreign language in such a context demands that language learners employ a conglomeration of cultural capital and linguistic competence, not only of the FL and its respective cultural norms, but also of their own (Fenner, 2001).

These may seem to have also necessitated the need for the development of critical cultural

awareness as an important purpose of FL education. As Phuntsog (1998) points out, the challenge of culturally-responsive teaching is to help FL teachers discover their negative presumptions and stereotypes. He asserts, “It is crucial to provide teachers with powerful learning experiences designed to bring about profound personal transformation needed to begin the process of becoming culturally responsive teachers” (p. 4). More specifically, we believe that to resolve these communication difficulties in the EFL classrooms the FL syllabus should be designed in a way so as to equip learners with an intimate knowledge of the target language culture, and that language teachers should develop consciousness toward learners’ cultural fragility and, in so doing, explicitly make *full* use of a culturally relevant FL pedagogy in a procedural, technical fashion. This is what we shall call in this paper ‘Culturally-adaptive English Language Pedagogy (CELP)’ to refer to a type of language syllabus that is organized around the cultural peculiarities of the foreign language culture. Such a syllabus should typically involve not only language development but also development in various aspects of the target culture. In the following sections we consider the idea of culturally-responsive FL pedagogy in the peculiar EFL context of Iran by addressing three types of questions:

- *What?* (i.e., the characterization of CELP)
- *Why?* (i.e., the significance of CELP)
- *How?* (i.e., the implementation of CELP)

2. Critical Cultural Awareness in Language Teaching

Culture, Brown (1994) maintains, is “deeply ingrained part of the very fiber of our being, but language –the means for communication among members of a culture- is the most visible and available expression of that culture” (p. 170). Therefore, it seems to be a cogent argument that one’s view of the world, self-identity, and systems of thinking, acting, feeling, and communicating may inescapably vary from one culture to another.

In this connection, the field of linguistics has long discerned that the forms and uses of a given language echo the cultural values of the society wherein the language is spoken.

Further, the professionals in the area of FL education (Galloway, 1999; Krash, 1988, 1995, 1998) have explained the extent to which the teaching of culture is important to the FL learner. Moreover, attempts made at attaching culture to language learning are induced by ideas emanating from sociolinguistic theory. From a sociolinguistic point of view, competence in language use is assessed not only by the ability to use grammatically accurate structures, but also to use language appropriately in any given context (Tseng, 2002).

Bearing all this in mind, it can be stated that international communication necessarily also encompasses intercultural communication, which is presumably followed by issues of cultural differences. That said, it seems to be a palpable argument that, in Brown's (1994) words, "a language is a part of culture and a culture is a part of a language. The two are intricately interwoven so that one cannot separate the two without losing the significance of either language or culture" (p. 164). However, given that every culture has its own conversation norms and patterns and that these are often peculiar to that particular culture, some of the norms can totally differ, and at times contradict, other cultures' norms. As a result, communication difficulties may emerge among speakers who are not familiar with the patterns and norms of the target language culture.

By the same token, several researchers such as, among others, Simpson (1997), Liddicoat (2000), and Soto, Smrekar, and Nekkovel (1999) have proposed both the rate and route for the integration of language and culture along with the ways through which culture-directed communicative language teaching may be improved. Considering that Hymes' (1972) concept of communicative competence in FL teaching has been expanded to intercultural communicative competence, the lionization of the native speaker (NS) has been critically put into question in the interest of an intercultural speaker who has acquired not only linguistic, sociolinguistic, and discourse competence, but also intercultural competence of which critical cultural awareness is one component (Byram & Guilherme, 2000). In view of this, Byram and Guilherme (2000) characterize critical cultural awareness as an

"ability to evaluate, critically, and on the basis of explicit criteria, perspectives, practices, and products in one's own and other cultures and countries" (p. 72).

To give but one example, there is ample evidence indicating that educators should primarily first make attempts at uprooting stereotypes from L2 teaching textbooks. Considering Byram and Morgan's (1994) observation, "textbook writers intuitively avoid bringing learners' existing hetero-stereotypes into the open and hope that [their] negative overtones will be counteracted by presenting positive images of the foreign country" (p. 41). As a matter of fact, stereotypes are immensely forceful, to the extent that individuals from different cultures have their own schemata through which they gestate and comprehend the world, and to enter another culture is "to deny something within their own being" (Byram & Morgan, 1994, p. 41).

3. Culturally-Adaptive English Language Pedagogy (CELP): What and Why?

It seems to be the case that foreign language learners are typically inclined to accept the negative perspectives towards both the target culture and the language they are trying to learn. In view of this, Valette (1986) clearly reprimands both FL teachers and curriculum developers for this anomaly, stipulating particular areas of cultural inadequacy in the language classroom. Firstly, he maintains that culture is typically considered to be a polarized comparison of the first language culture and target language culture in an 'us and them' format in which one side seems to be better or higher than the other one. Secondly, FL teachers are typically unsure of what their objectives exactly are regarding culture and cannot have a completely refined view of the target language culture. Thirdly, only a few language instructors administer tests to make sure that learners are actually achieving cultural goals, and, even if they do, these are likely to be poorly designed tests which merely tap concrete facts and discrete information in a multiple choice or true/false format. Finally, culture in the FL classroom tends to be superficial in that not enough of culture is taken into account, and sometimes the wrong sort of information is taught.

To further complicate matters, it appears that some L2 practitioners are rarely conscious of the need for cultural orientation. Even learning about the target language culture is sometimes seen as a source of intimidation to the values of the country where the learners' native language is spoken (Cakir, 2006). Particularly in those countries where having a close contact with the target language culture and its speakers is a scarce condition for the FL learners (e.g., Iran) learners may not be able to fully appreciate the significance of understanding the cultural dimensions of communication unless they pay frequent visits to other countries and experience the relevant vicissitudes. Sadly, non-verbal dimensions of the L2 culture are mostly gathered from television serials, which are far from being practical for communication purposes or which may occasionally convey flawed conceptions.

For reasons discussed above, if we are to acknowledge that there are serious differences in cultural values and conceptions among various cultural groups to be problematic, then these need to be approached or accommodated for the purpose of expediting successful transition. This is in line with Kramsch's (1993) contention that, if "language is seen as social practice, culture becomes the very core of language teaching" (p. 8). Bearing all these in mind, unlike Tseng's (2002) contention indicating that raising cultural awareness should be taken into account as "a process of learning rather than an external knowledge to be acquired" (p. 13), in the present paper we propose a *Culturally-adaptive English Language Pedagogy (CELP)* to refer to a type of language syllabus that is intended to explicitly help FL learners develop an intimate knowledge of the English language culture, and which also takes an analytic look at the native language culture as an equally important element in cross-cultural awareness. In such a syllabus, FL practitioners are required to be sensitive to learners' cultural fragility by explicitly making extensive use of a culturally relevant FL pedagogy in a procedural, technical fashion.

By 'procedural' and 'technical' we mean that the paralinguistic dimensions and proper manners of behavior in the two cultures should be taken into consideration in an explicit

fashion through the design and implementation of culturally-adaptive language tasks where learners are required to get familiar with the 'hidden', 'deep' culture-specific values and conceptions lacking the knowledge of which might otherwise lead to misunderstanding and miscommunication on the part of FL learners. We are not disputing that the current language syllabi are devoid of the cultural aspects of the target language, but that these aspects have been dealt with in a cursory and shallow manner.

To take a concrete example, EFL learners in Iran are usually exposed to cultural information such as geography, food, art, music, and history, which are not sufficient to make them understand, appreciate, and respect the target language culture. On the contrary, critical cultural information including values, ideals, conceptions, and communicative norms are mostly ignored. Whereas, according to Lado (1963), teaching a FL would necessarily lead to a significant change in learners' behavior through prompting them to experience a new way of life and new values of life alongside their already settled behavior pattern. Be that as it may, inspired by Pishghadam's (2011) notion of *Applied English Language Teaching*, which states that English language classes should be seen as sites where several life skills can be pre-arranged to be explicitly enhanced, as well as his book chapter co-authored with Professor Robert Adamson (Pishghadam & Adamson, 2013) positing the idea that textbooks can be written to develop both language and life qualities, in the present paper we make attempts at considering the possibility and feasibility of improving learners' critical cultural awareness in EFL classes in the context of Iran through the design and implementation of language syllabi that are specifically designed to promote cultural awareness among English learners.

Reasoning along similar lines, such a culturally-adaptive language syllabus purports not only to raise learners' critical awareness of the target language culture, but also to make them realize and understand the profound influence the cultural patterns of their first language exert over their thoughts, their attitudes, and their activities. Therefore, an obvious starting point in designing such a

syllabus would be to figure out how such patterns of culture function and to try to assist learners to appreciate their place within their own cultural system. Under this account, it is recommended that learners be exposed to these cultural differences as much as possible in the FL teaching classrooms. In view of the above, Figure 1 summarizes the tripartite rationale for the need to explicitly acquaint learners with the cultural components based on a pre-arranged culturally-adaptive syllabus;

these pertain to the emerging need to (a) understand and compare the cultural values and attitudes both of the foreign and the native culture at a more conscious and concrete basis, (b) take up a wider and deeper perspective in approaching the reality, and (c) take a more critical approach to raising an awareness of the hidden intercultural vicissitudes that inevitably involve potential mistakes in the comprehension and/or interpretation of beliefs, attitudes, values, and so forth.

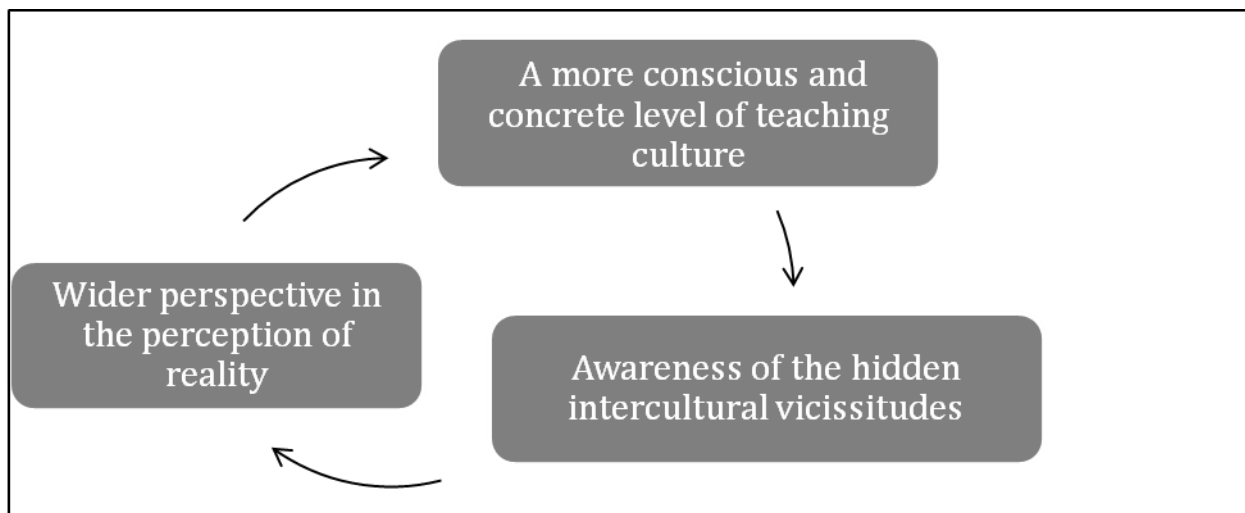


Figure 1
Tripartite Rationale for the CELP

4. Delineation of the Iranian EFL Context

Social interaction is the central feature of communication and is part of our everyday lives (Craig, 1998). It is also the means through which we can disseminate cultural and historical knowledge (Garton, 1992). Cultural values and interactive rules of communication are achieved through our communication with others. In the EFL context of Iran, where having a close contact with the target language culture and its speakers is not possible, learners cannot fully appreciate the importance of understanding the cultural aspects of communication with native speakers. Also, sadly, a predominant reductionist perspective of the aim of learning a FL seems to prevail in the English language teaching community in Iran, and learners do not supposedly need to read or know about, say, how English native speakers might behave in particular situations, because they are not primarily taught English for the ultimate purpose of conversing with the

members of the foreign language community. That being said, there is the possibility that Iranian learners feel alienation from the target culture in the process of learning a FL.

In teaching the English language to Iranian learners, therefore, instructors need to be sensitive to the fragility of learners by using techniques that explicitly improve their cultural understanding. Regarding intercultural learning, which is an essentially significant issue in the context of the FL classroom, it is important to be conscious of the distinctive classifications of culture, such as 'little c' and 'big C' culture. The big C culture (also called objective culture or formal culture) generally pertains to the study of history, literature, music, film, etc.; on the other hand, the little c culture (also called subjective culture) is mainly concerned with the less tangible dimensions of a culture as well as the informal and often hidden patterns of human interactions and viewpoints that might more

directly influence the FL learner's behavior (Alatis, Straehle, Gallenberger, & Ronkin, 1996). While it has been recommended (Tomalin & Stempleski, 1993) that a conglomeration of these two is to be employed, there is always a heavy concern regarding the subjective culture that triggers the advancement of intercultural competence among FL learners.

In this connection, if we take a closer look at the curriculum of the English Department at the University of Isfahan, Iran, where we are currently teaching, we can see that among the many subjects covered, considered to be linked to culture, and which have been integrated into the ESP curriculum for the past few years, are American history, art, literature, music, and so forth. Given the dichotomy of the culture discussed above, it would be reasonable to state that the materials presented in these field-specific English course books are aimed at equipping the learners with that type of knowledge which lies within the ambit of the big-C culture. This seems to have left behind the development of the equally significant skills that are related to the patterns of living, human interactions and everyday behavior, which are associated with the little-c culture of the target language community.

This also appears to confirm Tomalin and Stempleski's (1993) general contention that the teaching of big-C culture has been based on issues and themes clearly stipulated in the curriculum, whereas the culturally affected behaviors which constitute little-c culture have mostly been treated in a peripheral and piecemeal fashion. Be that as it may, Tomalin and Stempleski (1993) have also maintained that the study of culturally influenced behavior "should arise out of the language material being studied, but should nevertheless be clearly identified and systematically treated as a regular feature of the language lesson" (p. 7).

5. How: Implementation of CELP through the Integration of 'little-c' Culture into Iran's EFL Curriculum

Unlike learners being taught English through the current course books mandated by the

Ministry of Education or Ministry of Science, Research and Technology in Iranian schools and universities, learners who are to be involved in a culturally-adaptive FL pedagogy would feel better enlightened about the target language culture, feel more comfortable about operating within it, and would not ultimately get the impression that their own cultural values and conceptions are being compromised. However, it is often difficult for FL instructors to unearth and explicitly bring to light their learners' as well as their own cultural presumptions, values, and prejudices. Be that as it may, this needs to be done if they want to succeed at teaching foreign concepts to foreign learners without cultural bias.

Bearing all these in mind, it is thus worth noting at this juncture that designing a culturally-adaptive foreign language syllabus would necessarily involve the stipulation of a variety of topics and themes to be covered as part of the course syllabus, reflecting upon the areas of great significance in the field of little-c culture. The present paper puts forward 10 general topic areas (e.g., learners' lives, occupational values, and civility and manners in social life) along with 30 examples that we have adapted to suit the Iranian cultural context (invitation to parties, ethnic minorities, and mobility and friendship). Notice that, for instance, we had to exclude some topics from the list (e.g., sexual harassment, gender-related values, and attitudes toward homosexuality) because these are not normally discussed in foreign language classes in the Iranian context with an Islamic religious background and are deemed to cause obliquity and aberrance among Iranian youngsters, hence being banned by the Iranian Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance. Furthermore, for the sake of cultural and religious appropriacy, we opted to change a topic like 'dating a friend' (a routine cultural topic used in many European and American countries as well as in some East Asian countries) to 'dating a fiancé' (which is more in line with Iranian religious values). The detailed topic areas alongside their respective topical examples are presented in Table 1.

Table 1
Cultural Topics and Themes Related to the Little-c Culture

#	Topic Area	Examples
1	Ethnic Diversity	Ethnic Minorities; Festivals; Taboos
2	Dominant Attitudes	Disputing Authority; Controlling Nature; Equality and Independence
3	Cultural Patterns of Perception and Thinking	Approach to Perceiving Things; Various Thinking Styles
4	Verbal Interaction	Involvement in Conversations; Directness and Indirectness; Conversation Styles
5	Learners' Lives	Educational Values; Cooperative Learner Relationships versus Competitive Learner Relationships; Cheating; the Teacher - Learner Interactions
6	Family Values	Kinds of Families; Raising Children; Sharing Household Tasks; Balancing Career and Family Life
7	Occupational Values	Searching for a Job; Hiring and Firing; Employer-Employee Relationship; Workaholics
8	Civility and Manners in Social Life	Invitations to Parties; Clothes; Bringing Gifts; Thank You Notes
9	Relationships	Mobility and Friendship; Dating a Fiancé
10	Nonverbal Communication Patterns	Gestures; Body Positioning; Facial Eloquence; Conversational Distance

To put these topics and themes into practice, a variety of teaching techniques and strategies such as, among others, mini-lectures, classroom discussions, role-plays, games, simulations, culture assimilators, group presentations, culture capsules, culturgrams, personal interviews, and ethnic field trips, may be employed. However, one must first realize that some Iranian learners of English might experience certain psychological barriers and other hindering factors of the target language culture, sometimes as a consequence of being exposed to the negative demonstration of the owners of that culture in domestic TV news broadcasts (mainly due to political reasons). In this respect, L2 instructors can help learners turn such an experience into one of enhanced cultural awareness of the target language. That said, prior to learning about the target culture, learners should be responsive and sympathetic to the notion of learning about cultures that might, in one way or another, differ from their own.

To this end, L2 instructor should adopt the key role of breaking down learners' cultural blocks before starting any culturally-adaptive English language pedagogy. One approach to initiate teaching the target culture on a positive note could be to highlight the areas of resemblance between people of the two cultures. These areas of divergence should be depicted in Iranian FL classes as signs of natural difference not as motivators of raising hostility and resentment among the people of the two cultures. These differences can be justified and naturalized through holding discussions on differences that typically prevail between the members of learners' families, between families, and between cultures.

6. Concluding Remarks

The overall argument of the present paper was that the integration of a culturally-adaptive English pedagogy (CELP) into the Iranian EFL curriculum not only serves the development of language learning, but also

helps the enhancement of critical cultural awareness through reinforcing learners' tolerance towards the target language culture, and conveying a more thorough knowledge of, and appreciation for, the richness of disparate cultures. Put another way, the CELP empowers learners to make sound evaluations about what behaviors are required to embody for the purpose of operating successfully in a distinct culture. Such behaviors, manners, and attitudes are therefore not regarded as reflective of a leading, more powerful culture that makes them adjust but instead, are considered to be adaptive mechanisms that warrant FL learners' preference to move freely within the target culture without having a sense of alienation from their native language culture.

These were discussed under the rubric of the 'little-c culture' as an area in the study of culture the findings of which have rarely been applied to the English teaching curricula in Iranian schools and universities; whereas, most cultural elements covered in these Iranian institutions constitute the most concrete level of culture — discussed under the area of 'big-C Culture' — and are not supposed to make any significant influence on learners' behaviors or invoke their biases as those topics in the little-c culture normally do. Nonetheless, we believe that the culturally-adaptive English language syllabus introduced in this paper — geared towards more abstract topics typically covered within the little-c culture — would help Iranian learners of English not only to welcome the legitimacy of differences between the two cultures, but also to make their own cultural values and practices more explicit, enfranchising learners the decision on what aspects of cultural practices they might want to embrace.

Be that as it may, it is odd that such a culturally-adaptive English pedagogy has not to date been governmentally mandated to be regarded as part and parcel of any English education undertaking in Iran. While the real cause of such inadvertence is not known, one most probable reason may be a specific type of phobia based on which one can imply that exposure to the values and beliefs of the target language culture (or as Iranian officials would call it 'American, Westernized culture') can put Iranian learners at greater risk of being

deculturated from their home language culture than of remaining incognizant of the narrow cultural aspects of the target language.

Yet the point with which we need to make clear is that the culturally-adaptive syllabus we are advocating in this paper should not be misinterpreted as a typical culturally-responsive syllabus. A culturally-responsive syllabus is simply one that seeks respect for cultural differences and consciousness of the cultural resources the learners bring to the English class. On the contrary, explicitly acquainting learners with the cultural components based on a pre-arranged culturally-adaptive syllabus makes FL learners understand and compare the cultural values and attitudes both of the foreign and the native culture at a more conscious and concrete basis, achieving a wider and deeper perspective in approaching the reality. Besides, the culturally-adaptive language syllabus would not be aimed to 'advertise' the target culture but simply attempts to 'present' the elements of the target culture and adapt these to conform to native cultural values.

To operationalize such a culturally-adaptive English syllabus, L2 professionals in Iran are supposed to take the liberty of designing/adopting and implementing a variety of culturally-adaptive tasks and techniques at different levels, making use of all or some of the topics put forth in the present paper and explicitly prompting learners to perform these tasks throughout the course syllabus. Yet, initially, teacher education programs would be needed to provide FL teachers with examples of ways culturally-adaptive English teaching can be implemented in their classrooms. Moreover, workshops with the specific theme of culturally-adaptive English instruction may also be organized. In addition, 'Think Tank' research and training centers can also be established by inviting teams of experts from the fields of L2 Studies, Anthropology, and Cultural Studies to take an interdisciplinary perspective in the design and implementation of culturally-adaptive English teaching syllabi.

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