

LANGUAGE MEETING CULTURE IN THE FOREIGN LANGUAGE CLASSROOM. A COMPARATIVE STUDY

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Abstract: *The process of teaching a Foreign Language (FL) should imply teaching the cultural aspects connected to such a language, and not just its grammar and vocabulary. The present study was carried out to see both if this is the situation in the classroom and what could happen if such aspects are not taught. Two contexts were analysed; teaching English as a FL in Spain and teaching Spanish as a FL in England to students between 16 and 18 years old. The conclusion will show that if students do not learn about these aspects, they will never achieve full communicative and sociocultural competence in the FL.*

Key Words: teaching cultural aspects, English as a FL, Spanish as a FL, competence in the FL.

Resumen: *Enseñar una Lengua Extranjera (LE) debería implicar la enseñanza de la cultura relacionada con dicha lengua, y no sólo la gramática y el vocabulario. Para comprobar si esto sucede en el aula y a que puede conllevar el no enseñar aspectos culturales se llevó a cabo este estudio en dos contextos. El primero hace referencia a la enseñanza de inglés como LE en España y el segundo a la enseñanza de Español como LE en Inglaterra a estudiantes de entre 16 y 18 años de edad. La conclusión reflejará que si el alumno no aprende estos aspectos, no logrará una competencia comunicativa y sociocultural plena en la LE.*

Palabras clave: enseñanza de cultura, inglés como LE, español como LE, competencia en la LE.

1. Introduction

This study focuses on the importance of teaching cultural aspects in Foreign Language (FL) lessons in order to make students achieve full communicative and sociocultural competence in such a FL.

The reasons why such cultural aspects related to the Target Language (TL), that is the FL in this case, have to be taught and studied are connected to the fact that culture and language cannot be understood separately. Besides, a kind of cultural transfer arises when students try to learn a FL and if it is negative – transfer can be both positive and negative –, it could impede the learning process. Also, students will face what is known as *culture shock*, which could cause a lack of integration in the country where the FL is spoken if they had to spend some time there.

The present paper is divided in three parts. The first one refers to how and why culture should be taught in FL lessons, that is a theoretical part. The other two parts enclose different practical studies carried out in order to analyse if culture is taught in English as a FL lessons in Spain, as well as in Spanish as a FL lessons in England. A comparison will then be established between the ways the FL is taught in both countries, in relation to cultural aspects.

The conclusion will show that unless some cultural aspects are taught and students become aware of the fact that languages are more than just words, students will never achieve full communicative competence and learning a language will just be the equivalent to learning grammar and vocabulary, while it should be understood as learning a new way of thinking.

2. Why and How should Culture be taught in FL lessons?

Students of FLs are usually only in contact with the language they are trying to learn in the classroom, as it is not a language that is spoken where they live and unless they go abroad to the place where it is spoken, they will never find themselves immersed in a real situation. If teachers of FLs limit their teaching activity to teaching only grammatical rules and vocabulary, the language will be perceived by the students as if they were learning a dead language, something similar to when students learn Latin or Ancient Greek nowadays.

To be able to understand completely how a language works it is therefore essential to be familiarised with its cultural background, that is, the customs, historical and geographical aspects, traditions, values and the people's way of thinking. Languages are meaningless without culture, as languages are spoken by specific communities and they show specific structures to serve the needs of such communities.

If the reasons why culture should be taught in FL lessons do not still seem therefore, clear, as N. BROOKS (1987: 123) pointed out «as language teachers we must be interested in the study of culture not because we necessarily want to teach the culture of the other country, but because we have to teach it».

Language and culture are two interrelated concepts and they cannot really be understood separately, as F. BRØGGER (1992: 10) stated, «the study of the culture in which a specific language is spoken has come to be regarded as increasingly important for the understanding of that language».

However, the problem seems to arise «when the teacher is of the same cultural and linguistic background as the students» (G. MORAIN 1987: 121), in the sense that he/ she might not be familiar with the cultural aspects of the language he/ she teaches, and therefore, how is he/ she going to teach them? This is precisely one of the most important points in which the two situations compared in this study differ considerably. In England university students who are going to become FL teachers are obliged to spend some time abroad while they are doing their degrees, whereas in Spain this is not the case. While the former will have experienced directly the FL before starting to teach it, the latter might not even have ever been in the country of the FL they teach.

Once teachers have realised how important teaching culture in FL lessons is, they have to decide how to teach it. First of all, it has to be pointed out that both Spanish and English are spoken in many different countries, which means that there are many different cultures also involved. Therefore, the problem that appears is, which culture to teach. Usually, the English language taught in Spain tends to be associated to British English and sometimes American English, but certainly on very few occasions other types of English are present in textbooks or in other classroom material. At the same time, more emphasis is usually placed on the Spanish spoken in Spain than in South American countries when referring to teaching Spanish as a FL, however, it seems that in England some references to South American countries are also present in Spanish language lessons.

As textbooks do not provide teachers with these cultural aspects, except a few anecdotes, particularly in the case of English as a FL in Spain, teachers must use other materials. Nowadays, it is not a difficult task to find, especially, written material containing information about cultural aspects. Teachers can find the information they require in internet, DVDs and music, as well as in literature. Nevertheless, the best way to make students become familiar with these aspects would be to organise exchange programmes involving visits to the countries where the FL is spoken.

Furthermore, there are two other aspects to be taken into account. One of them is the fact that students have to be motivated to learn about these aspects. Again Spanish and English students differ here because in Spain English is a compulsory subject in most schools, whereas in England Spanish is chosen by students as one of their subjects. This can explain that English students may show a higher motivation to learn about cultural aspects than the Spanish students. The second aspect refers to the way the educational system establishes how languages should be taught. Since the levels compared in this study are equivalent, that is *Bachillerato* in Spain and *A Levels* in England, both groups of students are preparing for their university entrance exams and the levels should be similar. However, the situation proves to be very different. The university entrance exam in Spain – *selectividad* – corresponding to the English language does

not include any cultural aspects what so ever. On the other hand, the university entrance exam in England – *A Levels* – corresponding to the Spanish language is a much more complete exam and it incorporates cultural aspects.

3. Consequences of not teaching culture

If students are not taught cultural aspects in FL lessons, they will face different problems. First of all, in the process of language learning, students will go back to their Mother Tongue (MT) whenever they do not know how to say something in the FL and linguistic transfer will arise. The same will apply to how students will interpret or express aspects connected not so much with linguistic aspects, but with cultural ones, and some kind of cultural transfer will arise then. If they do not know that there are cultural differences between the two (or more) countries involved, that is their own country and the one (or ones) of the FL, they will transfer from their own culture.

Different linguists have expressed their opinion on this. Most of them are in agreement when they say that a language cannot be learnt isolated from its correspondent culture and it will make such a learning process easier, although not many devote their attention to cultural transfer, as it seems that transfer is more likely to happen at linguistic levels rather than at cultural ones. However, there are different researchers drawing their attention to the fact that transfer can also be present at a sociocultural level (E. OLSHTAIN & A. COHEN 1989), that is, if students become aware of how the target culture works their knowledge of the FL will improve. R. LADO (1987: 55) also mentions about «culture habits being transferred when learning a foreign language» and if the two culture systems are compared the possible future mistakes can be predicted. A. E. FANTINI (1997: 13) refers to culture transfer, although indirectly, when he states that «success with our native linguaculture (LC1) unfortunately, does not always ensure equal success with a LC2. In fact, an individual's LC1 is often the biggest impediment to acquiring a second».

Another consequence of not learning about culture is that students might have to face what K. OBERG (1960) calls *culture shock*, which refers to the lack of integration in the FL country when students go to such a country and they realised that there are many cultural differences between their own country and the new one and they may not know how to adapt to them.

The definite consequence is, therefore, that students will not learn the language well and they might become what M. J. BENNETT (1997: 16) refers to as «fluent fools», that is, someone who is fluent in the FL, but he/ she cannot understand the social and philosophical content related to such a language, which is precisely what is shown in its cultural dimension.

5. Practical Analyses

Two practical analyses were carried out, as mentioned before. They consisted of a multiple choice exercise – with two possible answers – and a composition the students had to elaborate in approximately 200 words. Both activities had to be done in one hour, students were supervised by a teacher and they could only be helped if they did not understand some vocabulary. Although the number of students was considerably big, it did not show as much as it was expected. However, some conclusions could be drawn – they will be explained below.

The students were divided according to several variables, such as sex and whether they had or had not been to the UK. As the number of students both in 2nd *Bachillerato* and *A2 Levels* was much smaller than the one those doing 1st *Bachillerato* and *As Levels*, they were taken as a whole, that is *Bachillerato* on the English as a FL group and *A Levels* in the Spanish as a FL one.

Before presenting the results of both groups, it is necessary to explain that the multiple choice exercise, in both cases, was difficult to prepare and once it was done, it showed that some questions were evident, whereas others were ambiguous. These characteristics are precisely commented on by R. M. VALETTE (1987) as being typical in multiple choice exercises testing culture. Also, the random factor plays a very important part; as it could be

observed, while students were doing the test, it was obvious that some of them were answering some of the questions at random.

5.1. English as a FL in Spain

English is taught as one of the compulsory subjects in most schools in Spain. However, the syllabuses do not seem to include cultural topics, except for primary levels. For this reason, textbooks do not refer to them and the majority of teachers, especially at state schools are Spanish, which means that not all of them are familiarised with the culture of English speaking countries. All these aspects lead to the fact that culture is very rarely taught in English as a FL lessons at *Bachillerato* level.

The multiple choice exercise consisted of 35 questions about every day life in the UK – as it was mentioned before, English is people’s MT in many countries, the UK was chosen because it was thought that more students would be familiar with this country rather than with any other. The composition was entitled *My summer holidays in England*.

The number of students –from different colleges in Madrid and Guadalajara – taking part in this survey as well as the percentages of right answers are shown in table 1. As it can be observed, those students who had been to the UK got more answers right than those who had never been there, the highest percentage being achieved by the female students.

Table 1. Distribution of students and percentages (Yes = had been to the UK, No = hadn’t)

	Male Yes	Male No	Female Yes	Female No	Total
No Students	29	21	36	18	104
% of Right answers	61.86%	56.17%	63.49%	49.37%	57,68%

Some questions were more significant than others and they showed either some of the lacks students had or how much they knew about specific topics. To comment on some of them – the percentages are shown in table 2 – question 3, which was about football, was answered correctly by most male students, while the female ones did not do so well. Question 19, which referred to when people are buried in the UK was answered wrongly by many students, as well as question 21, in which they were asked if you can have lunch at a pub, and question 27, which asked about whether people walk a lot or use the car rather. Results of question 20 simply reflect that students are told about Christmas traditions, as most students had been in the country only in the summer time, there was not much difference between the four groups. Both questions 34 and 35 show a similar tendency in the sense that those students who had been to the UK got better results as they had learnt about them in the country; 34 refers to usually eating everything just on one plate, and 35 is about what hot chocolate is like in the UK. Some of the answers showed that students were transferring from their own culture, but not all of them, as it could also be observed that they answered correctly to other questions which show differences between the two countries; they were either familiar with them or they answered them at random and got them right.

Table 2. Percentages of the most significant (right) questions

Question Number	Male Yes	Male No	Female Yes	Female No
3	96,55%	90,48%	55,55%	55,55%
19	34,48%	33,33%	25%	33,33%
20	72,41%	80,95%	80,55%	72,22%
21	31,03%	33,33%	47,22%	22,22%
27	31,03%	42,86%	22,22%	5,55%
34	62,07%	33,33%	66,66%	33,33%
35	65,52%	33,33%	75%	38,88%

As regards the compositions, it must be distinguished first of all between those students who had and those who had not been to the UK. Also, among those who had been there, there are two groups, the ones who had stayed in the country as tourists as opposed to those who had just been there as tourists. Most of them mention about stereotypes and only those who had been there for a longer period of time showed some of the cultural differences between the two countries. The students who had never been there had to imagine what it would be like to be there. This group of students was precisely the one that showed a higher lack of knowledge of cultural aspects and they just wrote about stereotypes; just as an example of how much stereotypes are fixed in some of the students’ minds, one of them wrote about *tea being a protestant drink*.

5.2. Spanish as a FL in England

Spanish is chosen as one of the *As* or *A2 Levels* subjects by those students who want to do a university degree which will require some knowledge of foreign languages. It is therefore, not imposed on them and they should be motivated to study it, as opposed to the Spanish students of English.

Both in their *As* and in their *A2 Levels* students had to write different pieces of work and carry out projects on several topics such as the political situation in Spain or in other South American countries, they also study some Spanish or South American literature or analyse films. Textbooks show more cultural aspects than the ones used in English as a FL lessons in Spain, but teachers have to get that information also from other sources such as internet. It seems that students should achieve better competence than the Spanish students of English.

The multiple choice test in this case consisted of 40 questions about every day life in Spain – Spanish, like English, is also spoken in many different countries as the people’s MT, but Spain was the country chosen as students were thought to have travel to Spain more than to any other Spanish speaking country, and they would be more familiar with Spanish culture. The title of the composition was *Mis vacaciones en España*. The number of students taking part in this survey was less than in the other group, as they were only the students in one Sixth Form College in Blackpool (Lancashire – England), as it can be observed in table 3, together with the percentage of right answers.

Table 3. Distribution of students and percentages

	Male Yes	Male No	Female Yes	Female No	Total
No Students	5	0	11	5	21
% of Right answers	54,5%	---	57,5%	55%	55,66%

Surprisingly the percentage of right answers was inferior – again the female group of students who had been to Spain got the best results and unfortunately there were no male students who had never been to Spain – to the one achieved by the Spanish students of English as a FL, however, it also has to be taken into account that this test included 5 more questions, which could explain these results. Both test originally included 40 questions, but 5 had to be left out in the English as a FL test because they were too obvious and this other second test had already been carried out, therefore, the 40 questions remained. Many of the questions were very similar, so as to compare both situations, but there were others that reflected traditions corresponding to each country that could not be used in both tests.

Most of these students had been to Spain as tourists and therefore, they had not really been in contact with many native speakers. Also, the majority of them had just been to touristy areas, which usually offer a very different image from that of the real country, this could explain that although they are familiar with cultural topics because they had to study about them in class, they do not know all that much about every day life aspects.

Table 4 shows the percentages of right answers of some of the most significant questions. As it can be observed, question 2, which referred to drinking alcohol out in the streets, which is something normal among youngsters in Spain, was not answered right by many students, as it is

not such a common practice in the UK. Question 3 referred to *bullfighting* and it was found out that out of Spain it is seen as a sport, whereas it is never considered a sport in Spain. Question 4 was thought to be a case of transfer, as students referred to the Spanish *football first division*, as *la primera liga* – that is *the premier league* – but then it was analysed with native speakers and this mistake could be due to the fact that in the English media it is only spoken about *la liga* when referring to Spanish football. In question 5 students have clearly transferred from English as they have interpreted that in Spain there is a *Prime Minister*, when in fact this is called the *presidente* of Spain. The results of question 8 show that students are familiar with the fact that Spanish people tend to live in *flats* rather than in *houses*. Question 18 could also indicate some kind of cultural transfer, as it referred to children wearing uniforms at school and they just applied the same rule to Spanish public schools, as it is also the case in the UK. Questions 22, 28, 30 and 34 were about traditions connected to Christmas time – 22, giving presents on 6th January, and 28, eating 12 grapes on 31st December –, the no celebration of Halloween in Spain – 30 – and the typical processions at Easter in Spanish towns and cities – 34. As it can be seen in table 4, most students were familiar with these aspects. One of the most surprising results was the one offered by question 32, which indicates that students are not familiar with the fact that there are not many vegetarian Spanish *tapas*, despite having been in the country and having probably been to *tapas* bars in the UK. The only explanation I can think of is that most of them are not vegetarian – only one of the girls did mention about being vegetarian in her composition.

Table 4. Percentages of the most significant (right) questions

Question Number	Male Yes	Female Yes	Female No
2	20%	18,18%	20%
3	0%	9,09%	20%
4	0%	18,18%	20%
5	20%	27,27%	0%
8	80%	100%	100%
18	100%	100%	100%
22	100%	90,91%	100%
28	100%	90,91%	80%
30	80%	90,91%	80%
32	20%	18,18%	20%
34	100%	90,91%	100%

As for the results shown by the compositions, the majority of the students who had been in Spain new about cultural aspects and they did not only reflect stereotypes, such as the fact that in Spain the weather can be bad as well. However, their experience as tourists could not certainly show as much as if they had been with native speakers of Spanish. A great number of students commented on *bullfighting*, whereas in Spain people are not always speaking about it. However, it is perceived as one of the most significant differences between the two countries. Most of them showed interest in the Spanish language and culture and they refer to the fact that both countries have cultural differences. The level of the language is much higher, in general, when compared to the compositions written by the Spanish students of English as a FL, who have been learning the language for a much longer period of time, which shows that FLs are taught much more in depth in the UK than they are in Spain.

6. Conclusion

The teaching of cultural aspects in FLs lessons should always be present because both language and culture are interrelated and they cannot be fully understood the one without the other, as a specific culture determines the way its correspondent language is structured. Whereas in England it seems that cultural topics are present in Spanish as a FL lessons, in Spain many EFL lessons lack such a presence of cultural aspects. The reasons might be due to the fact that

syllabuses of English as a FL in Spain do not really include these topics and that English textbooks – which are the most frequently used material in class – do not have cultural contents, also the lack of knowledge of the culture (or how to approach it) by the teachers of EFL, whereas teachers of FLs in the UK travel abroad as part of their degree courses and also include in their lessons cultural aspects as it is part of the syllabus imposed by the educational system.

What seems to be clear though is that the knowledge of such cultural aspects does improve the competence of FL learners and they will both understand and produce better structures in the FL if they know about the culture of the FL speaking countries. The lack of such knowledge may cause negative cultural transfer to arise not only when students are producing the language, but also when they are interpreting it. This cultural transfer will, therefore, influence negatively when cultures differ considerably.

However, students should be informed that languages are more than just words that can be translated literally into another language and when you refer to another language you are also referring to another way of thinking, which is reflected in the specific culture.

As regards the practical analyses presented in this paper, although the multiple choice tests do seem to have certain flaws, they could confirm what was presupposed at the beginning, that is, that students do transfer cultural aspects from their own culture when they do not know about these aspects either because they have not been told about them in class or because they have not experienced them while being in the given country. Therefore, teachers may be able to guess which mistakes due to cultural transfer their students could make if they compare both cultures – or more. Once they have pinpointed the potential errors, those cultural differences should be explained in order to make students aware of them and avoid their mistakes.

More research needs to be done hopefully carrying out the tests with more students – especially in the group of Spanish as a FL –, which I intend to do in the near future, as a larger number of examples could provide this survey with new insights into the world of cultural transfer.

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