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The Role of Visuals in Cultural Learning in the EFL Classroom

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Abstract

Language, as we understand it, is not only the product of culture, but also the emblem of culture (Gleason, 1961). Therefore, as far as the teaching of language is concerned, culture must be incorporated outrightly as an indispensable component of second language learning and teaching. In the environment of the EFL classroom learning, the inclusion of cultural visuals in textbooks has been found to enhance the learning efficiency in the language. The supplementary visuals of cultural background play a positive and essential role in developing a deep-rooted understanding of the language. The aim of this research is to analyze the students' interpretation of the cultural visuals used in the EFL textbooks. We know that each student's interpretation is different with respect to the cultural visuals in textbooks. The cause may lie in their different ethnic backgrounds and/ or knowledge about cultures other than their own. The outcome obtained is then divided into three major categories i.e. universal, cultural and sub-cultural individuals. The researcher has been able to affirm the notion that the prior knowledge of students about the culture of the target language helps them to create a strong foundation in the learning process. Further, the visuals of culture in EFL textbooks can draw a basic understating of students to help them in negotiating cultural understanding.

Keywords: *Visuals, Cultural Understanding, EFL Textbook, Sub-cultural aspect, Universal cultural aspect.*

Introduction

A great deal of earlier research on language learning has recognized the close relationship between language and culture.For decades together, researchers have been studying different languages and cultures in the world. Especially, they focused on how people speak a particular language, and reflect on the values of the culture where that language is used (Risager, 2011).

Nevertheless, learning the grammar, vocabulary, syntax and complete wherewithal of a language other than one's native language, and what is more, achieving reasonable communicative competence and fluency in it, are all challenging tasks. Yet, it may sometimes lead to a change in the way a person sees people from different countries and cultures. Many teachers of foreign languages believe that it is important for students to learn about the different customs, beliefs and values of the culture of the target language. In the past, it has been a practice to teach target culture in a contextual perspective to learners of a foreign language. Apart from this, some foreign language environments require students to learn cultural definitions and ideas from textbooks. However, a new thinking has recently developed in this regard. Today cultural learning in the EFL classroom does not require students to rote learning but rather expects them to understand and analyze the information given to them about the various cultures in their own way. This approach proves to be beneficial from the teacher's perspective because it helps them to see what creative learning abilities students possess and then a teacher can work and introduce new strategies and distinct approaches towards learning. On the other hand, from the students' point of view, it gives them freedom to interpret data in a way that they may want and apart from helping them to understand the language with physical expressions, which is far better. It is very significant for students in the foreign language classroom to know and grasp the various cultural values and even language related social norms and practices. One example of this is the knowledge of how people address others in the target language, starting with basic inputs such as how to say thank you or to apologize in the most appropriate way in the context of the target language.

The most popular and perhaps indispensable medium through which foreign language is taught is the language textbooks. Though, as a norm, these are usually printed on papers to create the appropriate learning environment for students, but in times when the world is going through a global pandemic, textbooks in the form of PDFs and audiobooks are more likely to be used. However, these practices have been in vogue for quite some time, at least since technology entered the realm of learning. We understand that textbooks have a limited scope for information and are not usually adapted to the changing conditions in the world. Approaches other than those relying on textbooks only for teaching may need to be embraced by foreign language teachers (Chen, 2010). This includes the use of visuals which act as an additional material to textbooks. These visuals may be in the form of videos, images or short films, post cards, charts, magazines and newspapers which might be utilized in the classroom. The use of

visuals in an EFL classroom has several benefits when it comes to the students' learning (Kiss &Weninger , 2013). Foreign language teachers may use visuals such as an image in a textbook to enrich the classroom discussion and give real-life examples.

Use of visuals i.e. images, videos, etc., help language learners get themselves involved more in the classroom discussions and can help them to store those real-life examples of foreign language, in the form of images, in their minds using their cognitive abilities. Visuals such as exciting images that depict the different cultures in an EFL textbook, may make students more interested in the topics being discussed since visuals act as a stimulant to the memory. According to Yuen (2011) these may help students who have different linguistic capabilities to relate to those real-life examples of cultural practices and may help them in the future. From this research study, one can examine how images in an EFL textbook would be helpful for the learners to understand and comprehend the language in a real-life learning way, students may also be able to compare and highlight the key differences in cultures by using and learning about both their native and foreign language.

Visuals and Cultural Learning in EFL

The story goes that visual aids can be used as a powerful tool for a foreign language tutor and learner as well. Without cultural insight and skills, even fluent speakers can seriously misinterpret the messages they hear or read, and the messages they intend to communicate can be misunderstood. In fact, when learners learn about a language they learn about culture (Byram,1989). While the significance of culture has been constantly mentioned, the specific contents and techniques pertaining to training in culture within the foreign language (FL) curriculum remain unclear to the FL instructors. Research has been done on the issue of using visuals for cultural learning in foreign language classrooms. One study of this sort is of the view that as the more visuals were used in the EFL classroom, the better the learning outcomes of the students were achieved. Moreover, the research agrees with the statement by (Kiss & Weninger, 2017) who claim that the use of visuals led to improve the understanding of cultural ideas of students in a foreign language classroom.

Visuals may be enjoyable for students because they stimulate and motivate students' interest in the target language. Visuals provide rich contextual examples of target language situations and culture and support a variety of practices in language teaching. Further, visuals may also simplify and clarify language points.

Literature Survey

Tran (2010) conducted an interesting study justifying the teaching of culture in EFL/ESL classroom. He has given importance to that group of students here whose native language is not English and such students may share so many cultures ethos, thoughts, and beliefs being in the EFL classroom. The issues concerning teaching English to L2 students have been raised in this research and the interface between cultural pursuits and EFL learning has also been elaborated upon by way of empirical research. The facades of cultures such as enculturation, acculturation cross-cultural awareness, cultural identity, cultural shock, and actual bump have been compared and contrasted too. The proximity of blood in between culture and language learning process has also been established herein. Noted viewpoints with regard to the teaching of culture in EFL classroom have also been compiled and critiqued herein.

A study by Wen-Cheng, Chien-Hung, & Chung-Chieh (2011) talkd about the different types of textbooks available to use in EFL classrooms. They discussed how most EFL classrooms do pay a lot of attention to textbooks so choosing the right textbook is very important. The study suggests using textbooks that have attractive visuals such as images, puzzles, etc., to be used in EFL classrooms. This study has also been able to prove the positive impact of this approach in teaching EFL to the students thereby considering the cultural scenario being involved while educating the students in EFL classroom.

In another research, Dai (2011) claimed that inclusion of visuals would make the EFL learning process more efficient and useful as visuals tend to improve the learning capability of students and hence increase the students' interest to learn. Moreover, due to this, students can take in a certain EFL classroom discussion successfully no matter what topic it is about. Based on this study, the type of method used to teach cultures in a foreign language class has a very significant impact on what the students learning outcome is. A method which uses a high number of visual techniques always proves to be beneficial for the students in an EFL classroom. Culture as it is known plays a very important role in our receptive standards while being taught in the EFL classroom as the intermingling of the students having different cultural background. It enables them to respect other cultures, too, and understand the role of cultures in unearthing the hidden complexities so associated with the EFL learning.

According to Mitsikopoulou (2015), a large number of textbooks used in EFL classrooms nowadays tend to be quite colorful and have a large number of images and charts In addition, most of them contain hyperlinks or additional visual resources in a form of a CD or a QR code which leads to a web link. This research shows as to how the use of such external support systems can make EFL learning process into the EFL classroom amongst students having different cultural backgrounds meaningful and trustworthy. The researcher in this article has also given the critical underpinnings of the use of textbooks used in EFL classrooms thereby finding out its enabling effect on the learners.

Krcelic & Matijevic (2015) have also worked more on the aspect of culture to be brought into the EFL classroom. They have given much stress on the visual world which can be of great value while bringing culture in EFL classroom. "A picture is worth a thousand words" and the same dictum has been taken as a yardstick in this research thereby explaining the value of visuals in the EFL classroom from the perspective of cultural advancements. Visual tools have been taken up as variables in this research thereby putting up the interface and interplay in between EFL teaching and multicultural centric students as learners. The visual tools can be also considered as facilitating techniques. It has also been proven as to how far the visuals can help the students of EFL learn faster the stuff being given to them in an EFL classroom.

In keeping with this research, Herrera & Leonardo (2017) tested the use of Virtual Learning Environment in and EFL classroom and found that it can lead to a positive impact on the students. The VLE techniques involve the use of visuals from the internet and other virtual arenas. This gives rise to an increase in the level of interest of the foreign language learners and further motivates them to study harder for their course. The study also suggests that some students may feel insecure about learning through VLE in an EFL classroom because of the lack of resources which they have. But once these issues were resolved, they felt more enthusiastic.

Kiss & Weninger (2017) have also explained the importance of cultural learning in the EFL classroom. They are of the view that cultural learning is an important variable responsible for the findings pertaining to the cultural communicative competence, cultural awareness and cultural meanings.

Albahiri & Alhaj (2020) have been found to be of the view that media has undoubtedly always facilitated the task of language learning for both instructed and non-instructed learners. According to a research conducted by Saudi researchers, more emphasis has got to be given to the use of technology and social media such as YouTube while teaching foreign languages. They suggest that since there has been noteworthy advancement in science and technology, making use of them would, in fact, helps make foreign language teaching livelier and more relaxed. The use of visuals such as those on YouTube can help make the foreign language classroom more interesting since it increases visual learning and provides favorable results thereby laying more emphasis on the cultural aspects of the students concerned.

These researchers have also shown in this paper the mutual dependence of variables like cultural membership, sub-cultural membership, living experiences and geo-grouping of learners. The variations associated with cultural learning in EFL classroom and their universal significance have also been touched upon. the usefulness of cross-cultural association of students in EFL classroom has also been depicted through the empirical method of research in this paper. Intercultural communicative competence of the leaners has been basically made the main variable in this research.

Karimboyevna's study (2020) has discussed every aspect of the impact of cultural backgrounds on the learning process of EFL in classroom. The interactions in the EFL classroom, multicultural experiences, intercultural awareness have been taken as variables in the empirical research conducted. Emphasis has been laid on the multicultural students centric teaching strategies. The importance of having cultural knowledge while teaching EFL class has also been described in this paper in greater detail. Five language skills: cultural knowledge, target language, usefulness of different cultures, pedagogical techniques have also been taken up while proving the data worth collecting. The cultural aspect of pedagogy while teaching EFL in the classroom has been given much worth and noteworthy consideration as it makes much sense in the EFL classroom during the imparting of knowledge in English language to the students having different cultural backgrounds.

Hesar (2021) have discussed the significance of the use of culture as an important domain of pedagogy in EFL classroom. This study has proven that culture is the important substratum of any civilization and has been accountable for the global growth of various languages. Language

classroom does address cultural elements in a big way. Learners also have an opportunity not only to learn other cultures but also to maintain their own culture while doing so. The main goal in this regard is to follow culturally responsive pedagogy in order to make students academically as well as culturally progress. Technology teaching cultural techniques can be of great help in EFL classroom. Culturally responsive teacher can contribute in a big way while taking EFL class. Sociopolitical aspect while giving cultural inputs while taking EFL class can also add more value to the lives of the learners.

Yurtsever & Ozel (2021) are of the view that language learning may have to be concerned about the variables such as reading, listening, speaking and writing. The multicultural class of students can learn much more aspects of the language in an EFL classroom. The qualitative and quantitative studies about cultural awareness have been analyzed by the researchers in this article. Mata synthesis procedure has been put to use while doing empirical research in this article. Approximately fifty studies in this regard have been evaluated while writing this article. The four codes of culture awareness such as conversational competency, cognitive competency, cultural competency and global involvement have been touched upon.

Research Design

The research design adopted in this research is exploratory in nature. It aims at analyzing as to what interpretations students in an EFL classroom use to an image given in an EFL textbook.

Research Questions

The questions that are intended to be answered in this research are as follows:
- What was the immediate response of the students to a picture which act as a visual prompt, from a textbook used in an EFL classroom?
- Are there any intra- and cross-cultural similarities and differences in student responses collected in the two geo-cultural contexts?

Research Method

This study used a very simple methodology inspired by a similar study by Kiss and Weninger (2017). A picture was taken from a French EFL textbook. This picture was a part of a reading activity under the section of festivals. The picture shows four people celebrating the socio-religious festival of Holi in India. The picture was provided to EFL students from different countries in the world studying in the United Kingdom. This was done so that they could interpret the images individually and were asked to write those down.

Figure 1. Image from a French EFL textbook showing people celebrating the Indian festival Holi

The sample size for this research was 152 students aged between 15-30. They were asked to complete this exercise as part of their EFL class in which the teachers were made to teach the topic of cultures around the globe. Around 67 of the participants belonged to European countries and were taking EFL lessons in England. The other 63 students belonged to Asian countries such as Malaysia, China, India, Thailand, Vietnam, Philippines, Pakistan, Korea and Japan and the rest of the 22 students were from North and South America. The second group of the participants belonged to more diverse cultures as compared to the first. All of the participants had to do the same task i.e., write down the first thing that comes to their mind when they see the picture. The participants were given a choice to use their own language or

use English, so that they would not feel any kind of difficulties in expressing their ideas and thoughts about the picture. The collected data of the study was analyzed and coded using "NVivo 10". Furthermore, this software helped in analyzing and interpreting the research findings in several ways.

This particular design was chosen for this research because of several reasons. Using a picture from a textbook (Figure 1) helped in assigning value to a national cultural category. The picture used would usually be coded as "Indian" or "Hindu" by most analyses. By choosing a picture of an identifiable culture, we wanted to see what connotations the students attach to the picture, since the visual could have several meanings for various individuals especially those who do not belong to that culture. The responses by the students from Singapore and those from France were quite different from each other. Many of the students belonging to the Asian countries such as Singapore were more familiar with the festival of Holi than those who belonged to countries such as France.

A single picture was chosen instead of a series of pictures because it was believed that just one picture could show the vast differences in the interpretations by the participants since a large number of students were involved. There are very few studies conducted in the past which analyzed the results of the interpretations and not the image itself. This is why the method used is an exploratory approach trying to analyze students' learning in a different way. A total of 1539 ideas were identified across the set of data gathered which were later coded into 311 different semantic units. As it was allowed for various languages to be used to record the responses, the meanings of these had to be compiled to identify the similarities. Finally, semantic fields had to be identified so that the data could be categorized into larger categories comprising of words used by the participants. An example of such a semantic field was 'paint' which included words used such as 'makeup', 'dye', 'paintball', etc. Since various languages were used to record the responses, the coding process was quite lengthy and continuous since suitable semantic fields had to be found for the data to be coded into. The software we used enabled us to assess the results of the experiment in a way through which we could clearly identify any cultural differences. This helped us in seeing how the results differed when there was a difference in the cultures of the participants. This showed how cultural or ethnic background of the participants have impact on the way in which they interpreted the same picture that was given to each one of them.

Findings

The findings of this study are categorized under the different types of meanings as interpreted by the respondents.

Universal Meanings

Overall findings of the study were quite similar to those summarized by Kiss & Weninger (2017). Some aspects of the picture were the same across all cultures and were construed in the same way by almost all participants. This indicates that the students from both types of countries, Asian and western had a shared explanatory schema (Maghsoudi, 2012). One such example of this is happiness. A large number of students responded by saying that they thought that the people in the picture looked very happy and appeared to be enjoying themselves. This could be because of the body language, facial representations or the atmosphere being shown in the picture. They also talked about the smiling faces of people in the picture and interpreted this to mean that they seemed to "have fun". However, most of the participants could not exactly identify what celebration it was though most of them said that it was a certain type of festival or a happy occasion. This shows that they used their schema, i.e., existing ideas of people gathering together for happy occasions and that was not something which occurred regularly since the people in the picture seemed to be behaving in a different way than they were normally expected to.

These findings are categorized under 'universal' because they are interpretations based on shared human feelings and past experiences (Meihami & Salīte2019). These interpretations of language learners and the research findings are important because they show that the students can connect their perceptions of the image to their basic human ideas. This can be beneficial in a classroom where people belong to different cultures and countries.

Cultural and Sub-cultural Meanings

These meanings were based on the traditions, beliefs and ideas of a certain group. This was in line with the cultural dimensions theory by Hofstede (2011) which investigated the differences in some cultures across countries and the impact they had on the meanings and interpretations of people attach to things that occur in their everyday life. These groups were based on geographical locations of their countries, such as, France and the Far East Asian countries. The data showed that the students who were asked to interpret the image tried attaching meanings to the pictures based on their experiences in their own cultures and their native countries (Hofstede, 2011).

Subcultural meanings were formed by several of the nationalities to which the students belonged (DeCapua & Wintergerst 2016). Some of the students who belonged to China and France talked about how the picture reminded them of how they used to play with paint in their school. This showed that most of our participants have been studying since quite some time and that was shown in their responses.

There were the findings derived from small groups of people. Some people answered the question by referring to unique occasions or festivals in their small groups that they belong to (Zhang, 2011).

Individual Meanings

The third category in which the implications of the study could be divided into was individual meanings of the results (Afrilyasanti, R., Cahyono, B., & Astuti, U. P., 2016). Some of the responses could just not be coded into any of the codes which we used to categorize the results since they were so unique and different from the rest of the results. For example, one of the participants who belonged to Singapore just wrote "Nicki Minaj" (a pop star) as their response to the picture. They did not give any explanation as to why this picture reminded them of the pop star. Hence, it was impractical to categorize such outliers into any of the categories. Another one of the participants responded by saying that one of the people in the picture looked "scary" to her. This is obviously an outlier since the majority of the participants mentioned happiness in their responses and she was the only one to say so (Ashouri & Fotovatnia, 2010). This was actually quite beneficial for a classroom since the vaster the individual responses were, the better it could be. Even though it was difficult to find out the reason for some of these individual responses, but they clearly indicated that the minds of the students are quite broad. Therefore, it could be said that the meanings of individuals were not just random, but they also occur because of their own socio-cultural associations.

What did this mean for the EFL lesson?

The overall findings of this study showed that the students did not have one single response to the picture. The vast variety of meanings and interpretations of the image shown based on their individual cultural experiences or the countries they belonged to. The study showed that the interpretations of students in an EFL classroom attach to a certain culture do not only depend on the visuals shown in a textbook but also their own personal experiences and affiliations. Outcomes of the study further depict that the students of an EFL classroom have a vast variety of experiences and ideas that they bring to the classroom (Vieluf & Göbel, 2019). The students trying to relate the information they were given to in a visual form with the existing ideas in their head shows how they can often interpret things being taught in unique and innovative ways. Having such activities more frequently will lead to the students to take charge of their own learning process and learning things in a way which is easier for them rather than just following one standard for all students (Astuti & Lammers, 2017).

Conclusion

The main idea behind this study was to show how students employ their existing ideas about cultures to the new information being provided to them via the textbooks. The way in which the students applied ideas that are general in nature or those that were more unique in nature, provided a very important resource for learning. This is proven by how one single visual prompt such as the picture we used, can have a vast variety of meanings attached by the students who belong to different cultures (Hofstede, 2011). This leads to widespread learning when it comes to cultures and would further help develop their linguistic capabilities. Therefore, the teaching of something like culture should be done by making use of student-led activities which would help develop their understanding even further. Moreover, language teachers seem to agree that media can and does enhance language teaching. Thus, in the daily practice of language teaching, we find the entire range of media-from nonmechanical aids such as household objects, flashcards, and magazine pictures all the way up to sophisticated mechanical aids, such as video cameras and computer-assisting teachers in their jobs bring the outside world into the classroom. In short, they make the task of language learning a more meaningful and exciting one.

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