



**A CULTURAL PERSPECTIVE STUDY TO THE  
INTEGRATION OF LITERATURE AND  
LANGUAGE EDUCATION**

***Dr. Umar Bello & Salihu Mamman Jangebe***

Department of English

Federal College of Education (Technical), Gusau,  
Zamfara State

**Abstract**

*This paper deals firstly with some theoretical reflections about cultural variations and its impact on the teaching/learning process of foreign languages. Examples of texts that contain some cultural aspects are provided. A comparison and contrast process between the target culture and the native culture is carried out and it has proven quite successful in the teaching and learning of English at undergraduate level. Most of the discussions and analyses were comprehended by the students. The teachers served as the initiators and facilitators of the task. The various tasks presented and analyzed here respond to empirical matters experienced by the researchers.*

**Introduction**

The main objective of the paper is to investigate the role that culture could play in the teaching and learning of

English as a foreign language in Nigeria. It thus aims at exploring the cultural variation and their effects on communication. This is in consonance with Jenkins (2002:3) who asserts “culture is the context of the social patterns that encounter learners in the communication event [...] which involves exchange of cultural information.”

Similarly, language gives indication to what kind of life people have. Comparison of patterns of behavior in a given culture with the native culture of the learner is important in order to an avoiding misunderstanding among individuals and societies. Fries in Lado (1957:28) states: “The most effective materials are those that are based on scientific description of the language to be learnt, carefully compared with parallel description of the native language of the learner.”

### **Attitudes towards Foreign Language**

Many syllabus designers support the inclusion of cultural aspects in the teaching of English because these are deeply rooted in language. Adaskou, Britten, and Fahsi (1990:12), for example, summarize the arguments for having a cultural component in language teaching, thus “It can promote international understanding, deepen an understanding of one’s own culture, facilitates learner’s visits to foreign countries and motivates learners.” (Mckay: 2004:22).

Some educators however, believe that inclusion of information about foreign culture, and making cultural comparisons, contribute to students’ feeling of

discontent over their own culture. This is absolutely untrue as students must have already developed their own values and beliefs through the process of upbringing, socialization, and the educational curriculum which are derived from the religion and ideals of the society. It was also argued that some patterns of behavior that exist in English speaking social contexts are the ones that many educators would prefer their young people not to see. Again, this is pointless because the students may come across the patterns of behavior through the various means of transfer of knowledge. For this reason, it is better presented and discussed in the classroom, so that the students would be advised to discard and reject what contradicts their own values. Many teachers also believe that it would be more motivating for students to focus on their own culture and country. That is true, of course. Moreover, comparing the foreign culture to the native one proved to be more interesting and highly effective in learning.

### **Teaching the Cultural Features**

Teaching and learning cultural aspects is essential for the foreign language learner. It helps them to understand the ideas and meanings incorporated in speech acts because they need to comprehend references or expressions that usually occur in the written or spoken languages such as “he is as old as the hills”, “Pretty as the picture” or proverbs like: more haste less speed, etc. both in speaking and writing. Moreover, they have to understand non-verbal communication such as nods, smiles, as well as the paralinguistic features like the tone of voice, gestures and facial expressions. Furthermore, students

have to pay attention to the cultural aspects that clash with the native culture as in the case of the idioms:- “When in Rome do as the Romans do” and “ If you can’t beat them, join them.” These clash with the Hausa culture where the principle is “ mai gaskiya yana tare da Allah.” This means that those who uphold the truth will triumph irrespective of their number.

Meanings are culture specific i.e restricted to the culture of the users. They vary from one culture to another i.e. some meanings may be found in one culture but may be absent in some other ones. The Hausa, for example have many meanings distinctions correlating with the different types of horse while English may not have as much. In the United States of America it is customary for a gentleman driving a car to open the door for the lady with him (as part of the native etiquette and behavior attached to driving in USA. If he doesn’t do this the lady may take it as an insult. In other societies, however, opening a car for someone to get in or out is usually the work of a hired driver.

### **Physical Reactions**

Physical factors are essential in determining meanings. Some spontaneous responses are universal e.g. a reddish face as a result of shyness hypertension as a response to anger. Naturally, the reasons of shyness and anger differ from one culture to another, but the physical response is the same. There are other semi spontaneous physical responses like laughter, smiling, and grimaces that are universal but culturally controlled. For example, the smile in some areas is used to hide enmity. Laughter is a

culturally acceptable way of hiding sadness among the Chol people in Mexico. It is natural to speak about some of the emotional and psychological conditions through certain parts of the body; for example the Mossis, in Upper Volta in Western Africa, speak about most of the emotional conditions through the heart e.g. sweet heart means happiness, the heart destroyed means sadness, the heart is dark means shameful, and the heart is infertile means jealousy. In Anuak language (one of the Nilotic languages in Sudan) liver is considered center of emotions e.g. (shallow liver) means quick anger; (big liver) means sadness; (fresh liver) means happiness; while (white liver) means mercy. To the Hausa people, dominantly found across West African sub region and beyond, stomach is considered as the center of emotion hence the expression, (white stomach and black stomach) which can be interpreted as happiness and sadness respectively.

On the issue of conversation among the various cultures consideration must be made as to what areas constitute “safe topic.” Safe topics to the English language teacher in Nigeria may include the weather, pets, children, etc. and the local context situations: e.g. (while in the room; or, queue). On the contrary, however, it is dangerous to bring topics that border religion, ethnicity, as well as partisan politics. In addition to these, asking what someone does for a living is generally safe but certainly, not asking how much someone earns for a living. So cultural variation can cause problems e.g. commenting about the cost of furniture or the taste of a meal may be acceptable in one society, but not in another.

In fact, it is difficult to generalize about what is normal or abnormal, polite or antisocial in conversations as there are so many cultural diversities, e.g. “silence varies in status”. It is an embarrassment in English conversations, to keep silent unless there are special reasons (such as moment of grief). However, in some cultures it is normal for participants to often times be silent- who speaks and much is spoken depends on the social status of the participants. For example, those at the lower rank may be expected to stay silent if their elders wish to speak. Even the basic convention of having one person speaks at a time may be broken. In some cultures, the phenomenon of several people speaking at the same time during a whole conversation is a perfectly normal occurrence (Crystal: 1987:12).

### **Taboo**

This is an expression or act that is forbidden, because of a religious or social reason. It is considered as an offensive social act, e.g. a taboo against drinking alcohol in some culture. In the Hausa/Fulani societies women are not allowed to mention the names of their father –in-law, mother –in-law or even the name of their first child. The situation is even more critical with the Zulu wife who might be put to death for mentioning the name of her father-in-law or even that of his brother. (Trudgil:1974:58).

### **Different Connotations**

Words that have widely different connotations in two languages are considered to be more difficult to learn

because they are connotatively harmless in the native language, but offensive or taboo in the foreign language or vice versa. When they are harmless in the native language, the students will use them in the foreign language without realizing their effect. When they are harmless in the foreign language, students will avoid using them for fear of setting off the same up the same reactions they produce in their native language. So the different world-view should not be ignored when different language positions are involved.

### **Translation**

In view of the cultural intricacies involved in the study of language, rather than been bilingual students should be encouraged to be bicultural as this would prepare them to comprehend, interpret, and communicate their thoughts better. Bassnett and Lefevere (1990:78) state that "...Since languages express cultures, translators should be bicultural, not bilingual."

The following illustrates the cultural differences between African and English: Family size and marriage – An African family is largely characterized by its relatively large size, strong family affinity, parental care, and intricate marriage traditions. In contrast, there is more tolerance in the social structure of family groups in English culture. Thus a son or a daughter, after the age of eighteen is regarded an independent adult. With regards to the attitude towards pets, it is noteworthy to find many English families keep dogs or cats as pest where as dogs, except for the purpose of security, are not kept in Islamic African homes. It is also obvious that

Physical proximity and contact often breed intimacy and degree of formality. In English culture, however, facial expression is a more revealing indicator of interpersonal attitude. In African culture, it is rather impolite to say no to any request even if the possibility of carrying it out is remote. An African usually responds to such requests by saying ‘I will see, if God wills, I hope I can...etc.’ The English people however, would answer directly ‘yes’ or ‘no’, depending on the possibility or their intention of fulfilling the request. Similarly, in business transactions it is normal and acceptable for the African man to bargain on the price of any commodity in order to cut down the price. This culture, is however, very rare in English culture (adapted from Mtawi:1998:54)

### **Foreign Culture and Teaching Activities**

Presented below are some useful foreign based exercises (Western cultures) to be discussed and shared in non-English cultured African classroom settings. The teachers would discuss the cultural issues/information with their classes and see if it checks or presents conflicts to the students’ set of values and beliefs.

#### **Activity 1**

It is 7:55. The Smiths are coming to dinner at 8:00. Gina and Frank are not ready for the Smiths. They want everything to be perfect when the Smiths arrive. Mr. Smith is Frank’s boss.

“Hurry, Frank, the Smiths are coming soon. We have to set the table. Bring in the dishes, please. I have already had the bowls for the salad and the cups for the coffee. I

don't have the knives, forks, and spoons. Bring these with the dishes. I have to put the table cloth on the table. Hurry, Frank, there is so much to do!"

"I am coming", says Frank. Frank is carrying the dishes, the knives, the forks and the spoons. He and Gina begin to set the table. Everything is ready. It is 8:00. At 8:01, the Smiths knock at door. Gina and Frank answer the door together. They are ready for their perfect evening.

Points to ponder:

- a) Is it customary for workers to invite their supervisors to their homes?
- b) Will the preparation for the meal be delayed until the last moment?
- c) Do both the husband and wife participate in these activities?
- d) Will the guests arrive quite promptly?

## Activity 2

Steve Lynch is an American engineer. He lives with his family of three children and his wife Pamela who doesn't work outside the home. After work, Steve comes back home. He likes to be with his family in the evening. Usually he or Nancy (his daughter) cooks dinner for the family. Then they wash the plates. Pamela just likes to eat. She doesn't like to work in the kitchen. She thinks it takes a lot of time and it is not interesting. Steve never criticizes her. Do you think he is right?

## Discussion:

- a) Discuss the traditional female role in your area.
- b) Compare the male role as represented by Steve in the foreign culture with the male role in your culture.
- c) Considering the gender role in your culture, do you think that Pamela should be criticized for not playing the expected female role?

## Activity 3

A family group has been quarrelling bitterly, the unity of the family has collapsed, and unforgivable things have been said. But the celebratory dinner to which they have all come is to be served, and the family sits on table in silence ready to eat. The plates are filled, and everyone sits waiting, the father breaks the silence to wish them all, "Bon appétit" and the meal begins.

Discuss and compare the following aspects:

- a) The family relationships.
- b) Number of serving dishes.
- c) The role of the father.
- d) Concept of silence.
- e) The social pattern for beginning meals.

## Conclusion

Since language itself is part of culture, the language teacher is of necessity, a teacher of culture. Thus, on the other hand an awareness of the culture of the native speakers who teach a foreign language is a requisite. For

this reason the syllabus, as well as the language teacher, should focus on cultural items relevant to the community speaking the target language. On the other hand, unawareness of cultural aspects would result in misunderstanding between the listener and the speaker, or the reader and the writer. Thus, a good knowledge of the culture of the target language is necessary for the development of the learner's communicative competence. Against this background, therefore, we recommend more time be devoted to the teaching process. Teachers should present foreign culture in their classes and correlate it with the native culture. The teachers of English as a foreign language (FL) must be equipped with considerable knowledge of the foreign culture.

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