

*Review*

# Promoting cultural literacy in the EFL classroom

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"To teach a foreign language is to teach a foreign culture". In my opinion, it is really bewildering how teachers can teach what they do not know. Accordingly, this study comes to lay a solid foundation for sssthe EFL teachers through empowering them and introducing them to the basic principles of promoting cultural literacy in the EFL classroom. In addition, it will be an indispensable contribution to enrich the cultural literacy bibliography which is limited. In this study, the researcher familiarizes the EFL teachers with cultural literacy and, simultaneously, sets the American Access Microscholarship Program as a model of cultural literacy promoting program in the EFL classroom. What's more, pivotal terms like cultural literacy, Amideast, Access Microscholarship Program will be clarified in detail. The researcher concludes his paper recommending those in charge to adopt this new philosophy in teaching English Language as a foreign language and consider the basic prerequisites in advance.

**Keywords:** Literacy, Teaching, Microscholarship, Culture

## INTRODUCTION

For me as a researcher and a teacher, teaching is more than just instructing students to be ready for the next day class, performing tasks, or administering tests. It's about passion, being a role model, making connections, and touching lives.

In fact, learning a new language entails new ways of thinking, feeling, and expression. I am certainly a big believer in knowing more rather than less. I am also a big believer in the idea that the more understanding about the world a person has, the more sense the world makes and the more pleasing it is to live in this world. But the question always resurfaces: am I presenting to my students information that is either useful or valuable for them?

During my twenty year experience in teaching English as a foreign language, I have travelled a lot and come to see the dominance and the importance of English language. Even, these days English is often used as a lingua franca among non-native speakers from a variety of language backgrounds.

Thus, familiarity with the target language culture is inevitably a must for both the teachers and the students. "To teach a foreign language is also to teach a foreign culture, and it is important to be sensitive to the fact that our students, our colleges, our administrators, and, if we

live abroad, our neighbors, do not share all of our cultural paradigms."( Englebert 2004, 37 ).

To be familiar with something is far from being an expert in it and it is entirely manageable. You know a lot about a few things. The very least the educators need to know is familiarity with the basics of cultural literacy which hold the key to laying a solid foundation. How can teachers teach what they do not know? It is really bewildering.

The key concept in cultural literacy is familiarity. Precision is not necessary in using English for the sake of communication. It should be noted that even American learners do not have precise knowledge of their culture. "Technical research is not going to remedy the national decline in our literacy that is documented in the decline of the verbal SAT scores". (Hirsch 1987, 159). (SAT is a Scholastic Aptitude Test which is a pre-requisite for College Admission in USA).

In its widest sense, cultural Literacy is about reading. It is about understanding the meaning of words based on a background of common knowledge that enables one to make sense of what is read. Thanasoulas (2001) stated that learning English as a foreign is comprised of a number of components including grammatical competence, communicative competence , language

proficiency and cultural competence, which is the knowledge of the conventions, customs, beliefs, and systems of meaning of another country.

How does one become more culturally literate? It could be easily achieved by reading more and by reading about different subjects. Naturally, when reading becomes a pleasure rather than a chore, one becomes more culturally literate. It's a simple fact that the more one reads, the more one can understand what is read; the more enjoyable reading becomes, the more culturally literate one becomes.

Specifically speaking, most of the EFL textbooks being used in the Palestinian tertiary education (post-secondary education) are mostly American. Paradoxically, most students and instructors are culturally illiterate. That is to say, they are unfamiliar with the American culture. Consequently, the instructors and the students waste their time and efforts learning nothing

.The process is wholly fruitless. That is, the students will not be able to communicate orally or in writing in a community other than their own.

However, fewer articles in the literature discuss promoting cultural literacy in the Palestinian EFL classroom. To be blunt, this is the first article to be written about this topic. Thus, this article attempts to address this issue. First, I will briefly set out broad definitions of cultural literacy and what it should entail. I will also trace the related studies asserting the indispensable need of mastering the multifaceted cultural literacy. I will highlight and share with the readers some of the ideas generated from my own teaching experience and observations in promoting cultural literacy. As a model of cultural literacy promoting program, this article will adopt the English Access Micro scholarship Program, in which the researcher was an instructor for eight years. Finally, I will underscore the need of incorporating and introducing cultural literacy activities into EFL classroom.

### **What is cultural literacy?**

Hirsch (1987) popularized the term in his book "Cultural Literacy" where he argued that to participate fully in society, a person needs more than basic literacy, that is, the ability to read and write. He maintained that early education should focus on content and that all students could achieve cultural literacy. Thus, he offered in his book 5,000 terms that he thought culturally literate Americans should recognize. The list included dates, historical persons, historical documents, figures of speech (idioms, metaphors, similes) and terms from science. He maintained that American children had to inherit this cultural knowledge if they were to share in the intellectual and economic rewards of a complex civilization. It should be noted that Hirsch is the pioneering researcher in the field of cultural literacy.

Aunk (2011) concluded that each ethnic group will define cultural literacy differently regarding the elements of knowledge it finds indispensable regarding its group legacy, its present and its future. That is, in American cultural literacy inter-ethnic conflict plays a historic and contemporary role in American life and is its basic element; Asians and Africans must be culturally literate Americans to function effectively in the United States of America.

Wikipedia (2009) defined cultural literacy as " familiarity with and the ability to understand the idioms, allusions (brief references, explicit or indirect, to a person, place or event, or to another literary work or passage which are left to the reader or hearer to make the connection) , and informal content that create and constitute a dominant culture from being familiar with street signs to knowing historical references to understanding the most recent slang".

Morrell (2002) accentuated that cultural diversity and the social context significantly affect the literacy process and articulated three components of culture: culture is a process of human perfection in terms of universal values, culture is the output of the imaginative and intellectual work which records human thought and experience and culture is a social tool which expresses social meanings and values in art, learning, institutions and ordinary behavior. In addition, he classified literacy as academic literacy which refers to the ability to read and write, engage with, produce and talk about texts that have general preference; critical literacy which is defined as the ability to understand the socially constructed meaning embedded in texts. As a result, these three- tailed culture and two-tailed literacy constitute the definition of cultural literacy.

To sum up, cultural literacy is knowledge of what one should know in order to be a functional member of an educated society. It includes an understanding of one's language, grammar, pronunciations, syntax in speech, and the basic listening, reading and writing skills along with the knowledge of mathematics and history. It also extends beyond text to mean understanding the cultural context and practices an individual is found in, an individual's ability to understand and appreciate the similarities and differences in the customs, values, and beliefs of one's own culture and the cultures of others. Specifically, it is the ability to understand the history and concepts that underlie a culture and to be able to converse fluently (if possible) in the allusions and informal content of that language.

### **Studies which underscored the importance of cultural literacy teaching and learning**

Recent studies focus on the seamless relationship between EFL teaching and target culture teaching. It has been emphasized that without the study of culture,

teaching EFL is inaccurate and incomplete. For EFL students, language study seems senseless if they know nothing about the people who speak the target language or the country in which the target language is spoken. That is, acquiring a new language means a lot more than the manipulation of syntax and lexicon.

Shamshayooadeh (2011) agreed with the notion of cultural literacy as an indispensable pedagogical tool we need to internalize the basic, factual and cultural information, which in turn will enable us to analytically critique and analyze various cultural, historical, and political phenomena by looking at them in a more critical light. Ziesing (2001) showed that there is a strong connection between language fluency and cultural literacy. That is, it would seem clear that improving the cultural literacy in the area of an English speaking country can improve not only people's English but, indeed, their quality of life. In terms of teachers incorporating cultural aspects in the classroom, it should be very strongly encouraged. He also added that it is almost impossible to acquire a vague knowledge of American culture as long as the learners live in their own dominant culture; the way that they can acquire knowledge about American culture is by studying, reading and exposing themselves to the English language media, including the Internet.

Leveridge (2004) concluded that language and culture are intertwined to such an extent whereas one cannot survive without the other. It is impossible for one to teach language without teaching culture. He also underlined that language policy must reflect both the target language culture as well as the students' teachers', and administrative persons' culture, thus avoiding any cultural misinterpretations.

Nakamur (2002) investigated the significance of English as an international language and came up with that it is becoming more vital as a means of global communication and it is a means to communicate to the rest of the world the users' identity, culture, politics, and way of life. He concluded that one doesn't need to become more Western or change one's morals to use English well in international situations. English can and should be international.

Callins (2006) suggested that providing literacy instruction that is culturally responsive promotes high achievement among culturally and linguistically diverse students. Consequently, he coined the term "culturally responsive literacy instruction" which bridges the gap between the student's school and the world of the student, is consistent with the values of the student's own culture, aims at assuring academic learning and encourages teachers to adapt their instruction to meet the learning needs of all students.

McKay (2003) reiterated that culture influences language teaching in two ways: linguistic and pedagogical. Linguistically, it affects the semantic, pragmatic, and discourse levels of the language.

Pedagogically, it influences the choice of the language materials because the cultural content of the language materials and the cultural basis of the teaching methodology are to be taken into consideration while deciding upon the language materials.

Van (2009) recommended that studying the literature of the target language is indispensable in cultural literacy because it exposes students to meaningful contexts that are replete with descriptive language and interesting characters. What's more, it introduces a panoramic, versatile set of vocabulary, dialogues and prose. More critically, it develops cultural awareness, and it encourages critical thinking about plots, themes and characters. Thus, all the related activities will be melted to conform to the student-centered and interactive tenets of communicative language teaching.

"The need for cultural literacy in ELT arises mainly from the fact that most language learners, not exposed to cultural elements of the society in question, seem to encounter significant hardship in communicating meaning to native speakers." (Bada 2000, 101)

### **What is the English Access Microscholarship Program?**

It is a two-year, 360-hour American English teaching and American culture promoting program. It is funded by the United States Department of State and administered and implemented by AMIDEAST (a leading American non-profit organization engaged in international education). To be a participant in this program, which was started in West Bank and Gaza in 2004, the 14-17 year old Palestinian should be disadvantaged, talented and academically distinguished.

This program encompasses the following components: English language instruction program, public speaking and discourse analysis training and cultural enrichment and community service activities. ([www.amideast.org](http://www.amideast.org))

### **Cultural Literacy actual practice in the Access Microscholarship Program**

The first component of this program is English language instruction program. Thus, Shining Star, a three-level English learning program and an American English curriculum, was used to improve the students' proficiency in general English, conversation and writing skills. "Shining Star offers manageable, customizable support to motivate students to succeed in English, in all areas of the academic, and in their daily lives." (Chamot, Hartman, Huizenge 2004, 4).

This curriculum is definitely culture promoting since it covers the four corners of cultural literacy. That is, familiarity with the American culture components is chiefly promoted; literature, science, space, history,

geography, politics, famous people are presented, illustrated and supported by audio and video media. In addition, general knowledge about the world is also introduced.

### **Actual practice in teaching Shining Star**

Personally, as a teacher of this curriculum, I had to read a lot about American culture, resort to a number of audio and video materials and consult American native speakers. But, that would have been fruitless but for the empowerment programs held by AMIDEAST regarding this curriculum. To begin with, all the teachers had to attend a one- year program called "PCET" – Professional Certificate of English teaching. In addition, some teachers along with a number of students were sent to the United States to have more access to the American culture and society. What's more, meetings, seminars, video-conferences, conferences and workshops were occasionally organized. Above all, a website was set up to provide an opportunity for the trainees and the participants to reflect and share with their access teaching colleagues online. The website is <http://vclass.amideast.org/vclass/>. Also, each participant had an access to engvid. Free English video lessons.

### **Sample topics and themes introduced in this curriculum**

The United States Culture:

"Extraordinary People ", "Abraham Lincoln", "I Have a Dream' and "New York City Firefighters", in which a number of famous and notable American people are highly eternalized and documented, such as Rosa Parks , an African American who brought about the new era of Civil Rights Movement , Helen Keller, a symbol of persistence and determination , Abraham Lincoln , who ended slavery and promoted economic and financial modernization, Martin Luther King, Jr., who was the youngest to receive the Nobel Prize for his work in ending racial segregation through civil disobedience, and the firefighters, who saved thousands of lives on September 11, 2001.

" World War I", " The First Americans", "The Road to Texas Independence", "Moving toward Independence : the Boston tea Party", "The Cowboy Era" narrate the history of the United States chronologically added to them the political positions of U.S.A in peace and war.

Songs : " This Land is Your Land" and "Roll On , Columbia" in which the pure and enchanting music is mixed with an accurate description of the U.S terrains and the patriotic feelings of the faithful Americans.

"Reading a Relief Map "which shows the geographical features of U.S together with all of its States.

General knowledge about the world

Scientific: "DNA, Genes, and Traits", "How Seeds and Plants Grow", "Telescopes", "Solar Eclipses" and "Ecosystems: The Systems of Nature".

Social: "Success stories", " Life in the Future", "Understanding the cultural differences" and "Heroes".

Space : " Earth's orbit " and Earth and the Milky Way".

### **COMMENT**

These sample topics constitute a marriage between American culture and the individual's basic knowledge of the world wherever that person lives. That is, the main purpose of this curriculum is not to envisage the American culture as controlling, but to underline the necessity of the familiarity with the American culture alongside the knowledge of this world as basic components of cultural literacy in this era of globalization.

### **Learning Strategies**

As I mentioned earlier, teaching such a curriculum is really a challenge; inexperienced and unqualified teachers will definitely stumble and move clumsily or blindly. Thus, the preparation and training period, which preceded this curriculum, paved the way for me to inculcate the learners with a number of learning strategies. But for these strategies, the content, the vision and the mission of this curriculum would have been aimlessly steered.

Cooperation: working with the classmates was a priority. Students had to work together in groups, or in pairs to complete a task or a project, demonstrate a process or product, share knowledge, solve problems and develop social skills.

Predicting: the students were motivated to anticipate what is likely to occur next. I provided them with illustrations, titles and headings.

Visualizing: in describing certain context, the students were encouraged to create mental images and use them to understand and appreciate descriptive writing.

Summarizing : students were motivated to make a mental, oral, or written summary of what they listened to or read, i.e. retelling a story or other texts in their own words.

Classification: words, concepts, physical objects, numbers, or quantities were grouped according to their attributes.

Taking notes: key information was jotted down as concept maps, timelines, and word-webs.

Using / Making rules: figuring out rules or patterns from examples and applying a rule (phonics, grammar, linguistic, and so on) to understand a text or complete a task.

Using knowledge and experience: brainstorming, making associations, analogies and writing or telling what

you know were always used to understand and learn something new.

Making inferences: Students had to guess meanings of unfamiliar words and ideas using the context of an oral or written text.

The implementation of these learning strategies practically interpreted the concept of the student-centered learning, which helps students to discover their own learning styles, to understand their motivation and to acquire effective study skills that will be valuable throughout their lives.

The second component is public speaking and discourse analysis training. Primarily, the general goal of this training is to empower the students to practice speaking in public and to listen and analyze public speeches. Rowe (2005) stated that the goal of this course is to improve the students' skills in presenting and debating prepared public speeches in formal settings. To more specific, this course included the following formal situations, which each student should master to be a public speaker: conferences, law courts, classes, media interviews, internal meetings, religious sermons and job interviews.

Teaching public speaking, the researcher following the following procedures:

The students listened to notable speakers: Martin Luther King, Jr. "I have a dream", John F. Kennedy - The Berlin Wall - Hannan Ashrawi, The world conference against Racism, and Ghandi - Non-violence is the first article of my faith - to be role models.

To train the student on making a speech, the following rule was given:

"Say what you are going to say ( Beginning), say it (Middle), then say what you have said ( End).

The students were asked to write the (Beginning) of a speech of their own.

Then each student delivered his speech beginning before the class and received comments from his colleagues regarding his confidence, facial expressions, capturing the attention, the content, class management, question and critical thinking provoking.

The same was done to the Middle and End of the speech.

By the end of the program, each student should be able to make and deliver a well-written, highly organized, mistake-free and convincing speech.

It should be highlighted that in the graduation ceremony of the Access Micro scholarship Program, a number of students were invited to read their speeches or essays before the audience and were awarded money prizes accordingly.

The third component is cultural enrichment, the purpose of is to "convey aspects of American culture in an accurate and sensitive manner and dispel myths and stereotypes associated with America and the Americans". (Amideast, 2006, 2) The following cultural American events were observed in the AMIDEAST Headquarters:

\* Halloween (October 31) Students prepared in advance information related to Halloween history and the way the Americans usually celebrate it.

Presentations about this event were made using PowerPoint, videos and Internet.

Simulating the real Halloween. That is, students worked as one group to simulate real Halloween activities. They carved pumpkins to make jack-o-lanterns. They designed masks as a means of guising to simulate the trick-or-treating rite, which is the key activity in which the students put on the masks and threatened other classes if they do not give them candy.

The class as a chorus sang "This is Halloween" "This is Halloween".

Thanksgiving (4th Thursday, November)\*

Presentations about this event were made using PowerPoint, videos and Internet.

A display of the ideal Thanksgiving feast table was organized by the students themselves. The table contained: turkey, mashed potatoes, sweet potatoes, squashes, pumpkin pie, and pumpkin.

It should be noted that the students enjoyed celebrating these events and asked for more.

The fourth component is community service, which is a priority in the American culture. Thus, we together with the students tried to follow the suit. Enthusiastically and joyfully a community service was carried out. How?

A brainstorming session was held with the students to decide on the best voluntary activity. The decision was organizing a day of fun and pleasure with the children with special needs.

Preparations included the coordination, materials and distribution of duties. The actual activities were: coloring the faces, painting, balloons, singing, dancing, contests, drinks, snacks and prizes.

After this whole day activity, the students were so happy to make those children smile. They also reiterated their intention to participate in any voluntary work whenever organized.

## CONCLUSION

Promoting cultural literacy in the EFL classroom should always be prioritized; aimless and inexperienced teachers would teach their students haphazardly. Therefore, well-organized culture empowering programs should be on the top of the agenda when adopting an American or British English textbooks or curricula.

The indivisible whole Access Micro scholarship program, which is set as an example for promoting cultural literacy, entails a number of components which light a candle for those seeking a well-tested and accredited program. Strictly speaking, it could be an exemplary model of an intricately intertwined program which includes highly interwoven components: English

language instruction program, public speaking and discourse analysis training and cultural enrichment and community service activities.

However, this program has prerequisites, namely experienced, insightful, creative and highly qualified teachers. To be more strict, cultural literacy promoting teachers should be empowered to practically implement certain learning strategies like making inferences, incorporating cooperative learning, predicting, problem solving, classifying brainstorming and summarizing in addition to a number models of teaching, such as role-playing, simulation, presentation.....etc.

In a nutshell, any cultural literacy promoting program should include empowerment in two fields:

Learning about the target culture (literature, history, myths, politics, linguistics, mathematics, science, space and so forth) which could be achieved by learning these topics at the universities or colleges or any capacity building programs. Learning the vague culture of the target language, which is only acquired by living in the target culture community. Therefore, as a part of cultural empowerment, cultural exchange programs should be organized to familiarize the teachers concerned with the gist of that culture.

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