**Reconceptualizing Computerized Culturally-Based EFL Programs For Scholarship Students**

**By**

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**Abstract:** For decades, English Language teaching materials have been, to a certain extent, neglecting the learner's L1 culture. As computerized programs are often targeting the largest segment of population possible, teaching materials and textbooks producers do not seem to put the learner's point of reference in focus, especially when it comes to monolingual providers.  Inter-language studies related to computerized EFL programs indicate learners develop hypotheses that do not always reflect the formal usage of the target language (TL). Learners’ hypotheses are based on a variety of input including L1 features, universal developmental patterns affected by overlapping programs, and TL idiosyncrasies not always obvious to monolingual teaching materials producers. Therefore, an attempt to incorporate all important aspects of the learner's L1must be emphasized.  Scholarship students must be exposed to L1 as well as TL culture as early as at the intermediate level, before moving abroad, to ensure Intercultural Competence (ICC) and Cross-Cultural Competence (CCC) and effective L2 acquisition and learning.

**Key Words:** Culture, Cross-cultural Competence, Identity, Intercultural Competence, Mother Tongue Culture, Culture and Pedagogy

**INTRODUCTION:**

 It is becoming very common knowledge now ( more than ever before), that interactional sociolinguistics is a field of study that is largely contributing to a better understanding of culture in relation to L2 pedagogy. It is also much concerned with how speakers signal and interpret meaning in social interaction. In fact, the term, as stated in the free online library (2007), and the perspective are grounded in the work of John Gumperz (1982a, 1982b) who was able to blend the different insights and tools from anthropology, linguistics, pragmatics, and (Goffman, 1981; Gumperz, 1982). Hence, sociocultural approach to language helped in orienting the new guidelines at both micro and macro levels was a culture according to which language is perceived as the primary means through which interactants negotiate and co-construct their understandings not only of disciplinary knowledge, but also of sociocultural practices (stated in the free online library (2007)). It was therefore assumed that in and through communication with others, "we manage and articulate, and probably discover our own individual identities, our [interpersonal relationships](http://encyclopedia.thefreedictionary.com/Interpersonal%2Brelationship)". Most of these theories and assumptions are nowadays looking into the conceptualization of terms in relation to culture. In other words, words, utterances, and symbols are bound to their context within each speech community. It is the role of modern pedagogy then to train learners in looking beyond the scope of cultural notions and link them to the other concepts and interpretation as they are perceived in other cultures or communities. What might be accepted in one's own speech community might not be accepted in others. The question then, is how to train learners to perceive this phenomenon as a natural process deserving attention, respect, and value.

**Aspects and Meaning of Culture:**

Culture as well as Intercultural Competence (ICC), or Cross-Cultural Competence (CCC), sometimes referred to as 3Cs, have been heavily treated by several disciplines such as Socio-Linguistics and Applied Linguistics. Intercultural competence is the ability of successful communication with people of other cultures. This ability may not be an innate faculty, but it can exist in someone at a young age, or may be acquired, developed, and improved as a skill due to willpower, risk taking as an adventurous interlocutor, willingness for discovery, willingness to exceland to be competent. However, ICC  is not a one-way process; rather, it involves more complex relationships among people who make sense of what is going on around them through communication with others from different speech communities. This process leads to the discovery of one's own cultural identity, or identities. From this perspective, those discoveries are open to negotiation and redefining in those intercultural encounters. It would be more interesting to find out to what extent L2 textbooks and computerized language programs have been conceptualized as participants in these interactions. Socio-Linguistics, on the other hand,looks at the socio-cultural practice of language and interactions, not pre-defined descriptors about a group of people in any given speech community. From this standpoint, culture emerges in people's social lives, and, consequently, particular cultural social groups should not be seen as well-defined, homogeneous,  and static entities whose members share fixed meanings and concepts. Along the same lines, Street (1993) has claimed that culture is a verb (i.e., it "is an active process of meaning making", ibid:25) and consequently research should focus not on what culture is, but on what it does as regards people's ways of making sense of the world (including their perceptions of *the self* and *others*). Holliday (1999) also rejects an essentialist orientation towards culture by showing that different approaches to culture will lead to important differences in the ways individuals conceptualize.
Applied Linguistics,is another interdisciplinary field of study that identifies, investigates, and offers solutions to language-related real life problems. Some of the academic fields related to applied linguistics are education, linguistics, psychology, anthropology, and sociology. Critiques to this naturalized approach to culture include Hall's (2002) view that culture should be perceived as a socio-cultural phenomenon reflected in the form of a concept or concepts, which in turn help us to interpret in a conceptual way:  human interaction. Specifically, he argues that a mainstream large culture paradigm (which associates a culture with ethnic, national and international groups) has dominated applied linguistic research for almost a decade and that this tendency has generated often *a law* acquired by or based on uninterrupted possession i.e.,  ideas about how certain groups of people (such as the Chinese or the Indians) behave, what they find acceptable, or polite and impolite, how they use verbal and non-verbal language, and so on. Alternatively, Holliday advocates a small culture paradigm which looks at culture as a dynamic phenomenon that involves complex and ever-changing processes. Benahnia (1992) stated that culture components can be segmented into different clusters each embodying many cultural rubrics or elements. As described in Holliday, Hyde, and Kullman (2004), a small-culture approach moves away from the culturist focus on pseudo-homogenous national groups (such in the Arab peninsula) often described in stereotypical terms; moreover, it allows us to question the often tacit and our unarticulated fears. As stated by Williams (1983:87), "*culture* is one of the two or three most complicated words in the English language, which is member of the West Germanic group of the Germanic subfamily of the Indo-European family of languages (see Germanic languages). It is nowadays spoken by about 470 million people throughout the world. English is also the official language of about 45 nations. Williams also argues that the complexity in the definition of culture is deeply rooted in history. Hence, the term *'culture'* and its multiple meanings is still debatable. This complexity has been challenged by some researchers through the proposal of alternative approaches and definitions (e.g. Byram, 1997; Moran, 2001; Seelye, 1997). Byram, for example, defines intercultural communicative competence as "an individual's ability to communicate and interact across cultural boundaries". Nelson Brooks (1976) on the other hand, argues that culture is made out of three main rubrics each of them involving many constituents. Therefore, '*culture*' for him can be called the *'BBV' culture*, i.e *Beliefs, Behavior, and Values*. For the sake of the purpose of this paper, we will not dwell too much on the various approaches related to the definition of the term culture, because we are much interested in the conceptualization of the cultural notions.If time was allowed we could go deeper to focus on how communication and interaction might expand, or get narrower when focus is placed on knowledge acquired via language textbooks, and computerized L2 programs.

Furthermore, the difficulty in understanding culture is also linked with the often taken-for-granted and vague and overgeneralized uses and perception of the word '*culture*' describing groups of people's behavior, norms and values. The question then, is how to minimize and narrow thefalse overgeneralization of those uses via L2 modern pedagogy and approaches?

**Culture and L2 Computerized Pedagogical Programs:**

From a logical standpoint, for something foreign (whether it is a product, a language utterance, or a cultural notion) to be adopted in a new society for general use, and become an aspect of its culture scope through interaction, language textbooks, or language computerized programs might be vehicles to its realization. Also, concepts in language programs are, in most occasions, either neglected, or overlooked. The concepts of the materials in use might not correlate with the MTL culture and meaning of those concepts. For example, the concept of freedom of speech is not seen, nor does it carry the same meaning in all countries. In other words, what might be permissible in one country might be totally banned in another. Therefore, concepts and culture are the two faces of the same coin: you cannot talk about culture in isolation of the attributed meaning of the concepts of its constituents. The interpretation of concepts is controlled and defined by the cultural context in which they are presented to the learner. Therefore, language learning and culture learning are strongly related, and that is not a new idea. However, much is yet to be discussed regarding both the configuration of this relationship and the implications of particular approaches to language and culture in the second language (L2) classroom. In this regard, the scope of the term culture and its constituents must be followed by a thorough examination of the extent to which L2 pedagogy can promote intercultural competence, cross-cultural understanding, and communicative competence. Concepts bearing moral values should be stressed more and more and brought up to the level of universality. Aspects of intercultural competence, relating to, involving, or representing different cultures, can be manifested via different cultural patterns: an intercultural marriage; intercultural exchange in the arts definitely leads to aspects of [*communicative competence*](http://encyclopedia.thefreedictionary.com/Communicative%2Bcompetence). This latter is a linguistic term which refers to a learner's L2 ability to interact and understand the culture of others. It does not only refer to a learner's ability to apply and use grammatical rules, but also to form correct utterances, and know how to use these utterances appropriately (and be politically correct).  By moving beyond the mainstream focus of culture learning and culture awareness as information about *the other*, the L2 learner moves to a much wider scope of culture which requires deep understanding and thorough thinking. The main argument of this article, is that L2 textbooks and language computerized programs can--and should--become key participants in classroom conversations about culture as they offer great potential for fostering learners' reflections about the components of their cultural identities. However, the question that poses itself here is on which culture should the focus be placed, i.eon L1 or L2 culture?, and how much of that culture should be involved, and at which level should the learner be exposed to it? In what follows, I describe and demonstrate in a diagram an approach which follows these latter premises. This approach emphasizes the fact that the focus should be on L1 culture at early stages via conceptualized textbooks and computerized L2 programs as a key participant in classroom conversations about culture. Specifically, from this perspective, the primary function of the language textbook and computerized L2 programs is not only to provide information about (and reflect) particular cultural understandings, but to trigger other participants in classroom conversations (i.e. teachers and students) with opportunities to reflect on their cultural identities.

According to the following diagram, foreign language (FL) learners at the beginning level should not be fully exposed to the target language culture. On the contrary, they should be exposed mostly to their L1 culture or Mother Tongue language culture. The reason behind that is to give them self-confidence and ability to talk to other people about their own cultural elements and issues derived from theirimmediate surroundings. In addition, L1 culture knowledge should start at an early age (Benahnia, 1992). The more the learners navigate through and up to the next levels in their FL learning, the more the scope of the TL culture gets broader, giving the learners a better chance to explore in depth the wide range of the cultural elements carried out via TL. This hypothesis can be better illustrated by the following diagram:

**Fig. 1: At which level should each type of culture be stressed more?**

**Local or Indigenous Culture**

**Target Language Culture**

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Preparatory and Elementary Level | Intermediate Level | Advanced Level |

**(Benahnia**: 1992)

**ICC in relation to scholarship students:**

As argued above, ICC might not be an innate faculty that every learner might possess, but it is a skill that some of us might have at an early age, while others might acquire and develop at a later stage throughout their life time. However, studies show that the bulk of our populations tend to acquire this skill even at primary school stage and tend to get it developed and improved at further levels of their schooling. Exposure to L2 culture at an early age might be a vehicle towards a better ICC acquisition. Therefore, L2 programs intended for scholarship students should target more ICC components in order to make their study transition abroad much easier and smoother. A minimum exposure to ICC components seems to be a must in this regard. Through experience, our scholarship students who were exposed to cultural as well as religious awareness classes seemed more relaxed and confident in dealing with people from other cultures especially during their early settling stage abroad. Furthermore, inter-language studies related to computerized EFL programs indicate learners develop hypotheses that do not always reflect the formal usage of the target language (TL). In this regard, learners should not be penalized for misuse of TL grammar or word choice because the focus is more on ideas and concepts rather than language form. Learners develop hypotheses that are based on a variety of input including L1 features, universal developmental patterns affected by overlapping programs, and TL idiosyncrasies not always obvious to monolingual teaching materials producers. Therefore, an attempt to incorporate all important aspects of the learner's L1must be emphasized, and having bilingual teachers is considered an advantage in this respect. Scholarship students must be exposed to L1 as well as TL culture in a more balanced way at the intermediate level to ensure intercultural (ICC) and cross-cultural competence (CCC) and effective acquisition and learning.

**CONCLUSION:**

This study endorses the above mentioned views expressed by the author, as well as other various researchers. Moreover, it supports the argument that language textbooks and computerized language programs are important participants in classroom meaning-making processes, as well as concept definition and meaning in relation to culture, and that through interactions with their textbooks, and virtual computer language programs, learners can gain better understanding of the complexity of their cultural identities and concepts and start comparing it to others.

Moreover, knowledge about cultural components seems vital in the foreign language teaching/learning field. Hence, teachers should be adequately trained on how to deal with cultural issues and how to integrate the cultural elements in their teaching activities in a more balanced way. It is also crucial to know which culture to focus on (i.e. L1 culture, or L2 culture?), and how much of that culture should the learner be exposed to, and at which level? Teachers should also bear in mind that an interculturally competent person, as mentioned by Antoinette Camilleri Grima (2002) should also have the capacity to interpret another way of life and to explain it to those who live another. We, as FL teachers, should always remember that we should advocate the theory and practice of integrating ICC in our curriculum and syllabi because since early stages of schooling without being fanatic nor racial towards our own culture nor towards other cultures (as stated by Williams, 1983, p19), *through an education for ICC*:

1. We open up to other ways of thinking and other methods of reasoning.
2. We find a tongue in which we can speak our humanity to each other.
3. We learn to see that our own view of the world is just one among many.

A final point should be made here. Let us not forget that ICC is NOT one single competence BUT a sophisticated combination of global competences, and that the essence of intercultural competence is the caring you have to share for others, respect of other cultures, and the adoption of different cultural aspects that might be beneficial to your own identity without losing faith in the constituents of your own cultural boundaries, background, and characteristics. However, as language teachers, we should not only focus on comparing, but contrasting the cultural differences between the learners’ L1 culture and the L2 culture because this will enable the students to correctly judge the appropriate uses and causation of language idiosyncrasies.

Moreover, textbook writers should focus more on content that would facilitate the acquisition of cultural competence, i.e. when writing a language textbook for Arab learners, for example, it would be more appropriate to expose the learners to the difference between the laws governing a Muslim wedding, for example, and the laws governing an English wedding. Not only that, but simple exposure and explanation related to certain cultural behavior or characteristics, such as ways of entertainment, negotiation, or even types of food and drinks and what they represent to a society or community, many trigger intercultural competence and awareness of self-identity among learners.

Suggestions for further research in this field might be geared towards details in examining the most influential approaches to culture as well as the role of textbooks and computerized language programs in culture teaching in the realm of L2 pedagogy.

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**Biography:**

Dr. Abdellah Benahnia **winner of the 2012 International Award of "Outstanding Higher Education Leader" in New Delhi,** and born in the famous city Casablanca, obtained his Doctorate degree in Curriculum and Instruction with a minor in Foreign Language Teaching/Learning from West Virginia State University, Morgantown, USA. His doctoral dissertation is about the Educational Reform Policies in Morocco. He holds also an M.A. in TESOL/Linguistics (Double Major) from the same university.

Currently, he is working as the Director of the English Language Center at King Fahad Medical City. He has published books related to his field of work including "English Grammar and Syntax", "Preparing for the TOEFL Exam", and "The Educational Reform Policies in Morocco: From Colonial Period to the Era of Mohammed VI ". Furthermore, he translated one of the most important works in the field of administration and leadership: "Administrative Behavior" by Herbert A. Simon, a Nobel Prize winner.

His work experience as a Cultural Representative of Morocco at Walt Disney World in Florida as well as his multilingual abilities, his understanding of Arabic, English, French, Spanish, and American culture, and his strong belief in multi-culturalism have benefited his colleagues as well as his students.