

# Introducing the Foreign Culture to Young Language Learners

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**Abstracts:** *The study of language cannot be separated from the study of culture. A good foreign language program should include cultural topics. They are potential for enabling learners to use the target language and for developing their motivation. In teaching young learners, teachers should skillfully integrate the culture of the target language in the materials. Children can effectively learn the foreign culture through meaningful experiences with cultural practices which are appropriate to their age and language ability. Interest in the culture of the target language can enhance language acquisition. This article discusses about the rationale for developing cultural awareness, and how to incorporate cultural elements in teaching English to young learners. As examples, it will demonstrate how songs and rhymes can be used as media for introducing the target culture.*

**Keywords:** *culture, foreign, young learners*

## INTRODUCTION

Foreign language learning comprises of several components, including grammar, vocabulary, as well as culture of the target language. A lot of books and articles have discussed about teaching vocabulary, grammar or functions to young learners, but only a few have discussed about the teaching of the target language culture. In this article, young learners refer to children between the ages of seven and twelve years or elementary school students. Teachers often do not really know when to start teaching the target culture to these learners. Some of them think that the study of culture should be postponed until the learners can study it in the target language. They consider that it is difficult to introduce cultural materials if the learners have very little knowledge of the target language. Ideally, the study of culture should begin on the first day of class and should continue there after. For example, when teaching greetings to Indonesian learners, teachers should point out the differences between the ways the English and Indonesian people greet. They should help learners understand that there are differences in the behavior patterns of the English and Indonesian people. The English people say 'Good morning', 'good afternoon' or 'good evening' when they meet, whereas the Indonesians do not always say so. This example shows that cultural awareness can be developed from the beginning of class. The way teachers introduce the culture of the target language and the choice of the cultural information taught should be adjusted to learners' knowledge, experience, developmental capabilities and interest. Since young learners like to learn in a playful situation, the introduction of culture should be fun.

## LANGUAGE AND CULTURE

Language is part of the culture of any community. It is the most representative element in any culture. The thoughts, feelings, values, and experiences of a community of speakers are reflected in their language (Byram, 1991: 13). In other words, language is the expression of the way people view their environment. Language also shows the character

of the people who speak it. It carries the socio-cultural traces of the native community who uses the language. This indicates the close relationship between language and culture. Linguistic and cultural knowledge are inseparable (Pinter, 2011: 38). Thus, learning a language includes learning the culture of the people who speak the language. Foreign language learning without understanding the characteristics of the target culture is considered incomplete.

What is culture? According to Peck (1984), culture is all the accepted and patterned ways of behavior of a group of people. It is the aspects of human life learned by people as a result of belonging to a particular group. This concept includes not only a group's way of thinking, feeling, and acting, but also the internalized patterns for doing certain things in certain ways. Thus, culture establishes a context of cognitive and affective behavior. Culture also indicates the interaction between language and thought since cultural patterns can be reflected in the language (Brown, 2000: 177). Conversational styles, for example, may be a factor of culture. Culture is also defined as the relatively stable set of inner values and beliefs generally held by groups of people (Peterson, 2004: 17). It suggests the things one needs to know in order to meet the standards of others. It binds people together. In general, culture is the whole way of life.

## **THE IMPORTANCE OF DEVELOPING CULTURAL AWARENESS IN TEACHING A FOREIGN LANGUAGE**

As mentioned, understanding the culture of the people who speak the language is important. Thus, the goal of foreign language programs is not only to develop communicative competence but also to develop cultural competence. This idea is emphasized by Savignon (2002: 10) who states that language learning should be more than the manipulation of syntax and lexicon. It should develop not only students' linguistic competence but also other components of communicative competence, including the socio-cultural competence. It is important for foreign language learners to understand the conventions, customs, beliefs, and systems of meaning of another country. To a certain extent, foreign language learning is foreign culture learning. Teachers cannot teach a foreign language without at least offering some insights into its speakers' culture. Competence in the foreign language can be fostered if learners take into account the foreign culture. The foreign culture is the background for understanding and producing the foreign language.

Teaching a language without teaching the culture in which the language operates means teaching meaningless symbols or symbols to which the students attach the wrong meaning (Brown, 2000: 189). Without the study of culture, foreign language instruction is inaccurate and incomplete. For foreign language learners, language study seems senseless if they know nothing about the people who speak it or the country in which it is spoken. They should know at least the simple things about the aspects of the foreign culture. In teaching English to young learners, teachers need to consider what will motivate the children to know more about the target culture.

## **GOALS OF INTRODUCING CULTURE**

In general, the study of different cultures aids learners in getting to know different people. This is necessary for understanding and respecting other people and their ways of life. It helps to open learners' eyes to the similarities and differences in the life of different cultural groups. Young learners or children should understand the fact that people all over the world are basically similar. All have the same needs, wants, and desires. Some

customs may be different because of geographical or historical factors. The differences however should not be exaggerated to mean that one culture is better than or inferior to any other. Through activities, the foreign language program can help children value other cultures. It can lead them to accept differences among people. It can foster learners' positive attitudes towards another way of life which is not the same as their own. Since language is part of a culture, children should learn what foreign children would say in talking about topics related to children's interest. Children should also be taught to say and do something with gestures and facial expressions what the foreign children of the same age would say or do in similar situations.

Tomalin & Stempleski (1993:7-8), modified Seelye's (1988) goals of cultural instructions point out purposes of teaching culture. Some of them which are considered relevant for young learners are listed below.

1. To help learners develop an understanding of the fact that all people exhibit culturally-conditioned behaviours.
2. To help learners develop an understanding that social variables such as age, social class, and place of residence influence the ways in which people speak and behave.
3. To help learners become more aware of conventional behaviour in common situations in the target culture.
4. To help learners increase their understanding of the cultural meaning of words and phrases in the target language.
5. To stimulate learners' curiosity about the target culture, and to encourage empathy towards its people.
6. To help learners develop the necessary skills to locate and organize information about the target culture.

This list shows the desirable outcomes of teaching culture. Teachers of young learners should consider them when designing materials and activities. In addition, Superfine (2002) states that the introduction of a foreign language may help a child to develop tolerance towards people who are different, which in the long run may contribute to a better mutual understanding among nations. However, that positive cultural values can only result from favourable teaching situations leading to successful learning. The favourable teaching situations include appropriate methodology, suitable teaching aids or media, and appropriately trained and prepared teachers. If these conditions cannot be met, early foreign language teaching might give negative results and produce unfavourable attitudes toward another culture.

## **PROBLEMS IN TEACHING CULTURE**

There are some problems that teachers of young learners may encounter in teaching culture as mentioned by Omaggio (1986: 361-362). First, teachers often feel that the curriculum is overcrowded and they do not have time to explain culture. Second, they think that the young learners should be exposed to cultural materials later, after the learners have mastered the basic grammar and vocabulary of the language. Third, teachers are often afraid to teach culture because they fear that they do not know enough about it. Fourth, teachers may not have been adequately trained in the teaching of culture and therefore, they do not know the appropriate strategies to teach culture. To overcome the problems, the introduction of culture should be integrated in the classroom activities. Even if the teachers' knowledge is quite limited, they can still help the young learners understand the cultural content of the teaching materials since their role is not to describe facts, but just to help learners have the ability to make sense out of the simple materials.

## A FRAMEWORK FOR BUILDING CULTURAL UNDERSTANDING

The integration of cultural awareness in foreign language teaching can be done at any level of education. In teaching English to young learners the cultural aspects to introduce should be simple enough. What aspect of culture should be taught to these learners? (Omaggio, 1986: 364) states that there are five types of culture aspects, namely: biological growth, personal refinement, literature and the fine arts, patterns of living and the sum total of a way of life. Among these, patterns of living should receive major emphasis in the early phases of language instruction. This focuses on the behavioral patterns or life styles of the people. For example, when and what they eat; how they make a living; the attitudes they express towards friends and members of their families; and which expressions they use to show simple language functions.

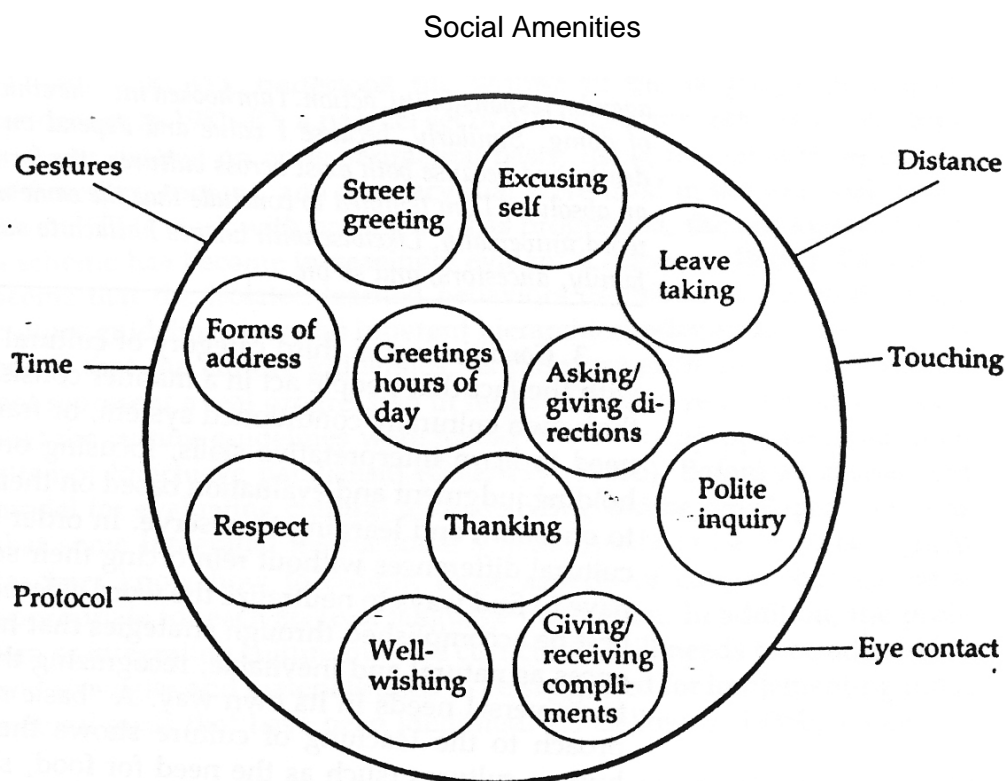
Galloway (1984) in Omaggio (1986: 369-370) suggests organizing instruction around four primary categories of understanding. They are as follows:

1. Convention. The purpose of the instruction is to provide students with information about how people behave, both linguistically and non-linguistically, in common everyday situations.
2. Connotation. The goal of this teaching is to show learners that language and culture come together to form meaning.
3. Conditioning. The aim of the teaching is to make learners aware that people act in a manner consistent with the structure of their own culturally conditioned system, or frame of reference.
4. Comprehension. This cultural understanding includes such skills as analysis, hypothesis formation, and tolerance of ambiguity.

These categories of culture introduction are not hierarchically arranged, However, the first category or convention is considered to be appropriate for teaching beginners. Galloway identifies two types of conventions: (1) context-determined (knowledge and information about extra linguistic conventions), and (2) function-determined (conventional utterances used to perform communicative task within the context). These clusters of conventions include both linguistic and non linguistic information about the cultural concepts. She describes the two types of conventions in the following illustration. (See the figure next page.)

The outer circle in the illustration represents context-determined information and the inner circles represent function-determined or culturally appropriate linguistic behaviour. These convention clusters can be used as a reference in choosing topics for teaching. However, teachers of young learners need to be careful in choosing functions and contexts which will be introduced. Those which are not very important for children, for example, contexts such as distance, touching and functions like well wishing or polite inquiry can be excluded or introduced later.

## Convention Clusters



Galloway (1984)

## STRATEGIES TO HELP YOUNG LEARNERS UNDERSTAND THE NEW CULTURE

There are many ways to develop cultural understanding. For young learners, it is important to note that they learn the new culture through meaningful experiences with cultural phenomena and these can be created in the classroom. The following are some suggested strategies:

1. Putting pictures containing cultural phenomena on the wall to create the atmosphere of the target culture, for example, pictures of the children activities, clothes, schools, hobbies which are not found in the young learners' culture.
2. Providing young learners with story books about the target culture, such as folk tales, fairy tales or other famous children stories to help them understand the foreign cultural practices.
3. Doing musical activities related to the target culture, such as singing songs, having small talks ( reciting simple common talks accompanied by music) , or having simple operettas to help young learners understand cultural expressions through fun activities.
4. Reciting rhymes from the target culture or doing finger plays to reinforce young learners' understanding of vocabulary and specific topics.
5. Colouring pictures of activities in the target culture to provide young learners with visual representation of cultural practices.

Among these strategies, two of them, namely using songs and rhymes as media to introduce culture will be discussed further.

## SONGS AND RHYMES

Songs and rhymes are similar in form since both of them comprise of repeated phrases or chants and they are also rhythmical. There are several reasons why songs and rhymes are considered excellent media for introducing culture to young learners.

1. Songs and rhymes as forms of language and language use are universal among human beings. Any known language has them. The themes they deal with are common to all cultures. However, the lexical items in these literary works may reflect something about the culture of the target language.
2. Songs and rhymes are different from other language-learning materials. They have a cognitive and affective content. Thus, they can enhance children's experiencing the target culture (Curtain and Pesola, 1988: 264).
3. Knowing what interest the students can help to create engaging and motivating foreign language lessons (Linse 2006: 6). Children generally like singing songs and reciting rhymes. Applying these strategies in the foreign language learning can develop children's motivation to learn the language. In addition, young learners can experience what other children do with the language. They sing and dance, and also perform rhymes. Indirectly the children learn the target culture.
4. Spoken-language uses are divided into 'interactional' and 'transactional'. Songs and rhymes give access to another type of spoken-language use: 'reactional' (Rivers, 1987: 94). Their purposes are not just to make people feel comfortable and understand the message better, but also to make them understand another person's verbal sensibility of certain phenomena. This sensibility to a certain extent is influenced by the culture where the person lives.
5. Songs and rhymes help students appreciate the richness of language, the ways in which words can be combined to create meaning. They also make children acquire a sense of history and place, and thus, they enrich cultural understanding (Low, 2011: ix).

Examples of Songs and Rhymes to Introduce Culture.

### **Song 1**

Title : Good morning  
Purpose : To help learners develop an understanding of how greetings are culturally expressed in the target culture.

*Good morning*

Good morning, good morning  
How are you, today?  
Good morning, good morning  
I am fine. Thank you.

(Traditional greeting song)

In using this song, teachers need to explain that when the English people greet others whom they already know, it is common to say expressions such as 'How are you?', 'How are things?', 'How is everything?' etc. Some possible responses to the questions besides 'I am fine.' can also be explained. It is important to stress that the English people always

say 'Thank you' or 'Thanks' to express gratitude to someone for something given, something done, suggested or said.

## **Song 2**

Title : Mary had a little lamb  
Purpose : To help learners increase their understanding of the cultural meaning of words and phrases in the target language.

### ***Mary Had a Little Lamb***

Mary had a little lamb,  
little lamb, little lamb.  
Mary had a little lamb.  
Its fleece was white as snow.

(Traditional song)

In this song, the word 'Mary' introduces young learners to a Western name. It is necessary for these learners to know some common English names. 'Lamb' is an animal which is close to western life. There are many lambs in countries such as English, New Zealand, Australia, etc. The people eat the meat and wear clothes made of the fur of lambs. The word 'snow' also describes a common phenomenon in countries which have four seasons. People can see snow in winter and children sometimes play with snow. These aspects of culture need to be understood by young learners.

## **Rhyme 1**

Title : The rainbow in me  
Purpose : To stimulate learners' curiosity about the target culture.

### ***The Rainbow in me***

Here are a few  
Of the foods that I eat,  
Bright and gay colors  
Of fruit, soup and meat.

Chops are brown;  
Milk is white;  
Plums are blue,  
As blue as night.

Grapes are purple;  
Beets are red;  
Butter is yellow  
On my bread.

Spinach is green;  
Ice cream is pink;  
Tummies should be  
A rainbow, I think

(Orleans, 1990)

This rhyme introduces children to some food, fruit and drink that native English people generally have. Some of them such as milk, butter, can be found in any part of the world, and children are quite familiar with them. What needs to be emphasized in teaching is that the young learners should know how often or how much English children have the food and drink described. Also, what these children usually have for breakfast, lunch and supper.

### **Rhyme 2**

Title : Good bye

Purpose : To help learners develop an understanding of how leave takings are culturally expressed in the target culture.

#### **Good Bye**

Good bye Mary.  
See you tomorrow.  
So long Harry  
Say hello to Joe.

Bye-bye, Mary  
I have to go.  
Have a nice day, Harry  
Well behaved wherever you go.

It is important for young learners to understand what expressions to say when people in the target culture depart. The gestures accompanying the expressions should also be practiced, such as waving hands freely. The purpose is to train the children to behave appropriately when uttering the expressions. There might be differences between how and what to say in their language and in the foreign language. The basic expressions should be memorized since reciting rhymes is a good strategy for children to learn the language and to develop cultural awareness.

## **CONCLUSION**

Foreign language classroom is an ideal setting for the development of cultural awareness and understanding. In teaching English to young learners, the introduction of culture should be incorporated into the teaching of the target language. Culture teaching should allow young learners to increase their knowledge of the target culture especially the conventional behaviour in common situations. More specifically, the teaching of culture should make learners aware of speech acts, appropriate or inappropriate behaviour, as well as provide them with the opportunity to act out being a member of the target culture. The goals of the teaching can best be met by giving young learners experiences with the culture rather than by talking about culture. Many of the experiences can be realized through media and activities used in the classroom. Using authentic materials such as songs and rhymes can help children know parts of the target culture. It satisfies children's natural curiosity about everything new and it helps them feel closer to the foreign culture and the language.

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