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**The Use of Reading Texts to Teach Cultural Elements in EFL Classes<sup>1</sup>**

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**ABSTRACT**

In today's global world, the rising role of communication paves the way for developing language teaching process. One of the most important factors in language teaching is considering language as a whole. It is not only a set of rules, instead it is developing and changing, as well as the culture of the community. The cultural side of language is a significant part of language teaching but generally ignored. The purpose of this study is to determine the effects of using reading texts in the book titled 'Select Readings' to teach cultural elements in EFL classes for 1st grade students at university. For the study carried out during the academic year of 2011-2012, 30 students studying at 1st grade have been chosen randomly. In order to test the development of cultural knowledge between the pre-test and post-test applications of the students, who participated in the study, a cultural knowledge testing is used that has been designed by the researcher. The research has been conducted with pre-test post-test model without a control group method; for the analysis of the findings SPSS 15.0 software program has been used. When the results of the test which has been designed by the researcher and conducted before and after the activities analyzed, the findings are gathered. At the end of the study it is concluded that there is a significant effect of teaching cultural elements in reading texts to the cultural knowledge of the university students.

**Key Words:** English Teaching, Reading Texts, Cultural Elements, Culture, University Students

**1. Introduction**

In today's world, communication among people from all over the world is increasing day by day. This brings people the need of speaking a common language so as to understand each other better. Because of this and various reasons like commerce, education, tourism, or others that can change person to person, language teaching is gaining more and more importance nowadays. Everyone knows that they need to learn a language but all of them cannot know how to learn it. So, the ways of teaching and how to learn a foreign language is discussed by scholars all over the world.

One of the most important factors in language teaching is considering language as a whole. It is not only a set of rules but it is something living. It is developing and changing, it has a culture inside it which means half of it in fact. The cultural side of language is a significant part of language teaching but generally ignored. In Turkey the situation is more or less the same. By considering my own personal observations, the grammatical rules, vocabulary and other theoretical parts are fully taught but cultural part can be ignored or undervalued.

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In Turkey, by looking own personal experiences from early years, unfortunately, most English teachers are not aware of the importance of the culture and context so our courses are full of rules. Our students know the rules correctly but they cannot communicate with the people from the communities whose mother tongues or second languages are English. There are some reasons for that like our students' lack of communication ability in the target language or their incompetency in reading and listening skills. It can also be because of the cultural differences. The students are not aware of the cultural differences or they have prejudice for other cultures. It is also important to eliminate this prejudice. One of the most important goals of language teaching is to make students look at the world from different perspectives.

As a solution to all those problems above, this paper aims to demonstrate the importance of culture in English Language Teaching and explains the role of reading texts, including cultural elements, in teaching culture and also advises the using of these elements during ELT courses. Reading skill should be developed in order to help students see language in context not in isolation and so they can learn culture unconsciously.

## 2. Review Of Literature

In this part, definition of the term 'culture', the importance and role of culture in ELT and also brief information about the studies conducted both in Turkey and abroad in this specific field are presented.

The term 'culture' is defined in various ways by scholars from different points of view. Some of them thought culture as products of fine arts and others thought culture as the shared knowledge of members of social communities like world views, living styles or some shared values. One of the older definitions of culture was given by the British anthropologist, Sir E. B. Tylor, defined culture (1871:4 ) as "[c]ulture is that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, customs and other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society". In that definition, Tylor takes culture as an 'acquired' thing, at that point a question comes to mind; can it be learned? After him a lot has changed and new definitions are made for the term culture.

In this study, instead of culture as a whole, the elements of culture or in other words the cultural elements are the points in question. What are these cultural elements?

And in another book Griswold (2008:65) classifies cultural elements as;

- Norms (how people behave)
- Values (what is important to people)
- Beliefs (what people think about something)
- Symbols (how people express themselves through art, stories, music, language, etc.)
- Practices (customs or patterns of behavior that may not be connected to beliefs and values)

On the other hand, there is no clear definition of cultural elements because when we looked at the definitions of culture, it is simply defined as the living styles of societies. So, the cultural elements in this study can be defined as the all aspects of a community. It can be either a location of a place, a term, an artist, a kind of food, a game or an idiom.

## 2.1. Cultural Awareness

Cultural awareness has great importance in integrating culture into language teaching, because it symbolizes the inseparability of culture and language. Scholars made different definitions on the term. It can simply be defined as the "sensitivity to the impact of culturally-induced behaviour on language use and communication" (Tomalin and Stempleski, 1993:5). To explain cultural awareness Kramsch also claims (1993:27); "If language is seen as social practice, culture becomes the very core of language teaching. Cultural awareness must then be viewed as enabling language proficiency. Culture in language teaching is not an expendable fifth skill, tacked on, so to speak, to the teaching of speaking, listening, reading and writing."

Having cultural awareness not only makes learners broad-minded about other cultures but also makes them to have a different point of view towards their own culture. Also, developing a good understanding of people from another culture involves not having prejudice and changing your attitudes towards them. According to Tomalin and Stempleski (1993:5), "cultural awareness encompasses three qualities:

- awareness of one's own culturally-induced behavior
- awareness of the culturally-induced behavior of others
- ability to explain one's own cultural standpoint" .

These three qualities clearly explain the important points of cultural awareness.

Cultural awareness also helps learners to gain a new perspective to look at both the target culture and their own culture. It helps to overcome the bias on cultural differences between two cultures and so make people more 'intercultural'. It can also help learners to understand that a culture isn't superior to other culture. It teaches to see the differences as just a 'difference' not a superiority or an inferiority. To sum up, cultural awareness brings learners a new point of view, this also helps them to make of language learning more easily and consciously.

## 2.2. The Relationship between Culture and Language Teaching

The close relationship between culture and language can be summarized as: language is a key component of culture. Michael Byram (1999) determines the aims of language teaching include cultural competence as well as linguistic competence, which can be labeled as "intercultural communicative competence". Brown (1994:165) describes the two as follows: "A language is a part of a culture and a culture is a part of a language; the two are intricately interwoven so that one cannot separate the two without losing the significance of either language or culture" .

Culture has become an increasingly important part of foreign language learning recently. There is no doubt that culture and language are closely linked, which means that concepts of culture play a very important role in understanding a language, especially a second language.

The history of the role of culture in language teaching has 50 years past. According to Karabinar and Yunuslar Güler (2012) from 1960s to 2000s the relationship between language teaching and culture has taken interest of a number of scholars. Especially short after the rise of sociolinguistics in 1960s and after that the rising interest on communicative competence in 1970s lead to question this relationship. (Lafayette,1975) (cited in Karabinar & Yunuslar Güler, 2012). These ideas make people to think language and culture together.

Karabinar & Yunuslar Güler state that after 1980s and 1990s new generations have started to tolerate cultural differences and adopted to new situations easily. Since 1980s, the assumption that there is a strong tie between culture and language teaching has been accepted a great number of scholars. This assumption has provided a basis for the view that "language teaching must inevitably be accompanied by teaching about cultural phenomena." (Risager,2006) (cited in Karabinar & Yunuslar Güler, 2012). In the introduction part of his book 'Cultural Studies in Foreign Language Education', Byram (1989) emphasizes the importance of culture in language teaching as 'the hidden curriculum of foreign language teaching'. This sentence summarizes the role of culture in foreign language teaching.

Kuang (2007) also states that learning a foreign language requires learning its culture besides its grammatical rules, pronunciation and vocabulary. As far as its known especially in Eastern communities, traditional EFL teaching just focuses on linguistic competence, Most English as a Foreign Language (henceforth EFL) teachers design their courses on acquisition of grammatical rules and underestimate the role of practical use of the target language. Even though they are aware of the importance and role of integrating 'real life' into their syllabi it is ignored. In curriculum design, culture teaching can be integrated with the four skills (writing, reading, speaking, listening) of English teaching. In this study the focus is on the reading skill integrated with the cultural elements because it is hypothesized that teaching cultural elements in context is permanent for the learners.

Reading texts are generally used to learn something in context, so a carefully chosen cultural content can help to develop a cultural basis in students while doing reading. Korkmaz (2009) carries out a study to evaluate English language course books in terms of cultural elements and found out that in the books there was no rhyme or reason about how many each of multicultural elements should be scattered through the course books. However, when the topics of the texts are investigated, there is a similarity since they mainly refers to food, social manners, behaviors or stereotypes of the cultures referred in the course books. A number of studies focused on the relationship between culture and language have been analyzed by the researcher and a few of them have been chosen as they have a lot in common with this study. In order to show different points of views some of them are mentioned below.

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Sárdi (2002) conducted a study on the relationship between culture and ELT. In this study, two different views on the relationship between language teaching and culture have been emphasized. One of these views states that language teaching cannot be thought apart from culture and the other claims that cultural context is not crucial for language teaching, moreover, language can be taught better by using contexts familiar to language learners. By taking those two views into consideration a survey carried out at a university college in Hungary investigating students' attitudes to the cultural content of their English as a Foreign Language courses. By looking the results a general overview of students' attitudes towards the subject can be detected.

In another study conducted by Oguro (2008), starting from his own personal experiences as a Japanese boy in the United States, he mentions that in the midst of debate over the treatment of culture in foreign language education and the increased exposure to culture in the global economy, the knowledge of other cultures is more significant than ever. In the study he put emphasis on the importance of using the language we learned, he highly criticized the teaching ways of English in Japan because the ELT system was based on grammar and translation. To him culture must have been an area of foreign language education that both teachers and students enjoy and yet it is the hardest to address. The purpose of this exploratory study is to describe how culture is addressed in the fourteen high school EFL reading textbooks in Japan. The results show that the reading texts were altered and the original version was abused so the culture is not reflected the real life. This study puts emphasis on the originality of reading texts. It is important for our study to examine the reading texts from this point of view.

Erten and Razi (2004) conducted a study on the influence of cultural schema and reading activities on reading comprehension. It was carried out at Çanakkale Onsekiz Mart University, Turkey with 3rd grade students at the department of English Language Teaching. The aim of this study is to determine the contribution of cultural elements in reading texts to the development of students' reading skills. According to the results of the study, cultural tendency to the text is very important in terms of reading comprehension.

Different from Razi's study, the study of İlter and Güzeller (2005) study on the culture as a motivational factor in EFL classes. Their study has carried out to help language teachers motivate their students' on target culture. It also aims at evaluating the students' ideas about the cultural differences. They develop a questionnaire whose first section is about the personal information of the students and the second section questions the attitude of the students towards the cultural elements of textbooks in EFL classrooms. The questionnaire was applied to 150 preparatory class students. At the end of the study carried, it is concluded that the students from different high schools in Turkey have a tendency of learning different cultures by learning the target language.

By analyzing those studies it has been determined that the relationship between language and culture is gaining more and more importance. All of them emphasize the significant role of culture in language teaching. In Oguro's study (2008) it is criticized the ignorance of the role of culture in ELT, in this study it is also mentioned as one of the problems. In Sardi's (2002) study the cultural elements in course books also mentioned and it emphasizes the importance of providing authentic materials to the students. In this study the importance of authentic materials are also emphasized. İlter and Güzeller (2005) also put emphasis on the motivating role of culture in EFL classes. This study does

not test the motivational side of culture but during 12 weeks of instruction, it can be said that the motivation of students towards the course were high and permanent.

In Turkey, one of the biggest problems in language teaching is that teachers think language as a set of rules. They teach all grammatical structures in details, and students memorize them. But when they need to use them in real life situations the problems start. First of all, they compose a sentence in Turkish in mind and then try to translate it into English without paying attention to cultural differences. It is really hard to communicate in that way. And also as the students are unaware of the cultural differences between the cultures, they can produce some sentences which sound meaningless to the native speakers. Finally, this study aims to show whether it is effective to teach cultural elements by using reading texts.

### 3. Method

The study is designed as an action research study. It is a systematic type of research which is designed as learning by doing. Burns (2010) defines action research as:

“ Action Research is part of a broad movement that has been going on education generally for some time. It is related to the ideas of ‘reflective practice’ and ‘the teacher as researcher’. Action Research involves taking a self-reflective, critical, and systematic approach to exploring your own teaching contexts. So, one of the main aims of it is to identify a ‘problematic’ situation or issue that the participants – who may include teachers, students, managers, administrators, or even parents – consider worth looking into more deeply and systematically”.

It is composed of four stages as planning, action, observation and reflection. In this study, participants are college students and the problem is their insufficiency in integrating culture with language learning.

In this study top-down, bottom-up, skimming and scanning strategies in reading are all applied time to time in the courses throughout 12 weeks, Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) and the Direct Method (DM) are often used. The Direct Method is used because in this method culture is emphasized and the syllabus is based on topics rather than linguistic structures. Larsen-Freeman (2000:29) points out that:

“Language is primarily spoken, not written. Therefore, students study common, everyday speech in the target language. They also study culture consisting of the history of the people who speak the target language, the geography of the country or countries where the language is spoken, and information about the daily lives of the speakers of the language”.

These sides of the Direct Method are directly related to this study. Culture is in the centre of the teaching and learning process.

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Communicative Language Teaching is used because it is based from the idea of 'language is for communication'. Larsen-Freeman (2000:131) mentions that:

"Learners need knowledge of forms and meanings and functions. However, they must also use this knowledge and take into consideration the social situation in order to convey their intended meaning appropriately. Culture is the everyday lifestyle of people who use the language. There are certain aspects of it that are especially important to communication-the use of nonverbal behaviour, for example, which might receive greater attention in CLT".

Like the Direct Method, CLT also emphasizes the importance of culture in language teaching. Culture is inside the everyday life like communication.

The population of this study is the Faculty of Economics at Giresun University in 2011-2012 academic year fall semester and the sampling is the students who are at first year of this faculty. The English classes in the first grade of the university are compulsory. There are two groups for each grade and one of them have been elected whose level is pre-intermediate and so appropriate for the study. Their average age is 19. It is a case study aiming to follow the development of one group of subjects. This group is composed of 30 students, 18 girls and 12 boys, getting day-time education attending the 4-hour classes per week at the Faculty of Economics.

### 3.1. Data Collection Instruments

In this study in order to measure the students' current cultural knowledge and their development at the end of 12 weeks a "Proficiency Test" has been applied which has been designed by the researcher, during the preparation period of the test, the ideas of the some instructors both from the Department of English Language Teaching and the Department of Educational Sciences for test preparing techniques, are taken into consideration. The necessary literature review is also done. It is composed of 25 multiple choice questions including the cultural items which then will be taught throughout the 12- week courses. In the first lesson the test is handed out to the students and 30 minutes given for 25 questions. At the end of 12 weeks of instruction, the same test is handed out again as a post-test in order to see whether they have developed or not throughout the 12 weeks. Then the students answer them, the duration was the same as pre-test.

### 3.2. Data Analysis

In this study the proficiency test has been designed by the researcher. The results of the pre-test applied to the subjects before the 12-week study and the results of the post-test having the same questions with the pre-test have been compared and the difference have been analyzed. Statistical techniques such as mean, standard deviation, frequencies, percentage, and T-tests were used to analyze the statistical data. "SPSS 15.0" data analysis program was used to make the calculations. To conduct statistical analyses, the threshold for significance was accepted as  $p < 0.001$ , so discussions and comments on the findings of the study were shaped in accordance with this significance threshold.

### 3.3. Procedure

In this study, the same test as pre- and post- has been applied to the students. The tests have been applied only to experimental group. There is not a control group because the aim of this study is to see the effects of teaching cultural elements by using reading texts rather than comparing two groups. The reading passages in the book titled 'Select Readings' have been used to teach cultural elements to the experimental group. The teaching process has lasted 12 weeks (2 hours per week) and totally 12 reading passages have been studied throughout this period. During this twelve weeks lessons have been planned as pre- , while and post- reading stages. But this study differs from a typical reading lesson as paying attention to the cultural elements existing in the reading passages.

### 4. Findings

In this chapter, findings gathered from the data and discussion part are presented together. Findings cover the statistical data about pre-test and post-test scores of the experimental group and the hypothesis emphasized at the very beginning of the research.

**Table 1. The comparison of the Pre- and Post- Test scores of "Proficiency Test" of the experimental group**

		N	Mean	St. Deviation	T	significance
	Pre-test	30	33.20	9.28	-12.549	,000*
	Post-test	30	78.93	17.66		

\* p <.001

The results of the t-test applied for the pre and post-test scores of the experimental group show that the significance level is ,000 (p<.001). As it appears within the significance threshold, it can be said that there is a statistically significant difference between the pre-test and post-test scores of the students. Relating to the test result, it can be said that the use of reading texts to teach cultural elements to university students is effective.

The results also show that the students know a little about the cultural elements of the target culture(s), their pre-test scores are poor. They may have heard about the cultural elements in the test but they cannot remember their meanings correctly. Maybe they have problems about recalling. But after 12 weeks of instruction with the reading texts including those cultural elements, the students' post-test scores go up noticeably. The reason of this increase can be explained with the role of reading texts in recalling the meanings. After the application of the post-test the students mentioned that they could remember the cultural elements by thinking the reading text they were in.



The reading texts are also enjoyable and different for students. Most of the students took part in this research are totally included in the lesson. It is because of the reading texts which are suitable for their age and interests. They like finding similarities between themselves and the others from American or British culture.

This study also enables students to gain a better understanding of culture and language. They are great sources to learn about the target language. They also have great value to the students by providing them authentic language. Since the students see some expressions, idioms, sentence patterns that are used daily in the target language, they gain confidence about their capability in English.

Briefly, considering the test results and the feedback by the students, it can be said that the process had a positive effect on the attitudes and approaches of students towards the target culture(s), and also there is a considerable development in their cultural knowledge.

## 5. Conclusion

In this study, the use of reading texts in the book titled 'Select Readings' in teaching cultural elements to the university students have been examined.

The experimental group is composed of 30 first grade students ,18 girls and 12 boys, attending English classes at Giresun University. The study is twelve-weeks long which means a semester at the university. First of all, at the very beginning of the study, a proficiency test designed by the instructor has been applied to the students as a Pre-Test. In this test, there are twenty-five questions asking the meanings of cultural elements which are taught later in the 12- weeks period. The same test has been applied again as a Post-Test at the end of the twelve-weeks of reading instruction. Afterwards, the findings regarding to the development of knowledge of cultural elements have been analyzed by "SPSS 15.0 data analysis program". After the statistical analysis of the pre-test and post-test, the result is 000 ( $p < .001$ ) it can be concluded that teaching cultural elements in context is more effective than teaching them in isolation, because probably most of the students have heard those cultural elements before but they can't remember their meanings as they have always seen them in isolation, they have memorized but then forget. Teaching cultural elements in context helps students to recall the meanings in a course of time. The students also pay extra attention when they learn that those reading texts are authentic, it seems more 'real' to them. Teaching cultural elements through reading texts also helps students' developing reading skills. They also have tried hard to participate discussion parts at the post-reading stages of the lessons which also help them to develop their speaking skills.

The studies carried out on this issue is generally emphasizes the role of culture in language teaching. In Oguro's study (2008) it is criticized the ignorance of the role of culture in ELT, in this study it is also mentioned as one of the problems. In Sardi's (2002) study the cultural elements in coursebooks also mentioned and it emphasizes the importance of providing authentic materials to the students. In this study the importance of authentic materials also emphasized. İter and Güzeller (2005) also put emphasis on the motivating role of culture in EFL classes. This study doesn't test the motivational side of culture but during 12 weeks of instruction, it can be said that the motivation of

students towards the course were high and permanent. And like those studies the present study reveals the importance of integrating culture into language teaching.

Briefly, it is clear that the use of reading texts to teach cultural elements is effective for university students. Furthermore, as the students are interested in the subjects of the reading texts they felt more motivated to participate in the lessons and they started to see language not only a set of rules but also a living thing developing day by day. But it should also be underlined that this study may not give the same results in different groups.

The findings of the current research revealed that the use of reading texts including reading passages to teach cultural elements is effective and hence, their usage in language classrooms can be suggested for several reasons.

There are also some suggestions can be made for further studies:

1-The same proficiency test can be applies to the same group after a year in order to test the permanence of the information.

2-The same study can be carried out with different age groups.

3-The cultural elements in the book are written in bold so they attracted students' attention. Another book in which the cultural elements are not written in bold can be used and then compared to the results of this study.

4-Throughout the study, the students' positive attitudes are observed but it isn't tested. An attitude test can be applied to the students in order to see their attitude clearly.

5-The cultural elements can be classified as elements related to food, elements related to clothes etc.

6- The same study can be applied with a different book or reading texts.

7-There may be a control group in which the students are taught the same cultural elements in isolation so as to check the effectiveness of teaching cultural elements in context.

In brief, this study can be considered as a guide to the teaching of cultural elements in reading passages. The findings gathered at the end of this study are evaluated to reflect the usefulness and effectiveness of using reading passages to teach cultural elements to EFL students.

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