



# *International Journal of Languages' Education and Teaching*

ISSN: 2198 - 4999

April 2016, Volume 4, Issue 1, p. 132-143

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## **LITERATURE AS A FACILITATOR OF TARGET CULTURE LEARNING**

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### **ABSTRACT**

The purpose of this study is to investigate how literature courses, involved in the curriculum of the department of English Language Teaching from the second year to the fourth year, help students to acquire the target culture in EFL classes. Since learning a language does not mean only learning the lexical structures of any language, culture holds an important place in internalizing the way of thinking and appropriate use of target language. This study has been designed in a naturalistic environment, thus interview and observation were used as the main data collection techniques. The study was designed as a descriptive qualitative research. Participants were chosen by the help of an experienced colleague working in the above mentioned department for three years, and most of the participants were under her supervision, thus this case facilitated the process of interviewing participants. The findings showed that the literature courses contribute much to gain the target culture due the very nature of literature reflecting the society and traditions of society in which it was written. In addition, learners may have the chance of comparing their own culture with target culture and this facilitates their learning. However, some missing points and misapplications were reported by students in providing a more appropriate environment for reflecting the target culture.

**Key Words:** Culture, Literature, English, EFL Classes.

### **1. INTRODUCTION**

Culture has been regarded as one of the fundamental elements of language learning since the language learning does not equal only lexical structures used to generate sentences (Byram & Fleming, 2002). Therefore, good language learners should have knowledge about the features of target culture to join the learning process thoroughly. Otherwise, it is inevitable that learners may encounter hardships in expressing themselves appropriately and understanding the individuals using target language. However, the role of culture was neglected due to the effect of grammar-translation method dominating the field till 1980s. Second or foreign language teaching was based upon grammatical structures and vocabularies, and these were regarded as the core factors in acquiring any language (Hall, 2005). The last quarter of twentieth century initiated a new era signifying the necessity of culture in language teaching process (Matos, 2009). In this manner, communicative language

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teaching began to be used by the authorities and this led to a process incorporating culture and language teaching. For this reason, many European countries revised their related curriculums regarding this condition. However, what someone should understand when mentioning about the culture? What are the borders of this concept? Michael Byram cites Geertz's (1975) definition of culture as follows:

“An historically transmitted pattern of meanings embodied in symbols, a system of inherited conceptions expressed in a symbolic form by means of which men communicate, perpetuate and develop their knowledge about attitudes towards life” (Byram & Fleming, 2002, p. 18).

Considering the above definition of culture, it may be stated that culture and language are interrelated into each other, and the speakers of any language use some cultural figures during their conversations whether consciously or unconsciously. However, this definition of culture belongs to the heydays of grammar-translation period that is the culture was not regarded as an important part of language teaching. For this reason, that definition reduces culture into a group of traditions handed down through generations in a static way. On the other hand, culture has begun to be characterized as a dynamic and variable entity in the later studies related to culture and language (Paige, Jorstad, Siaya, Klein, & Colby, 2000). The most important reason of such a new definition probably comes from the changing conditions of 21<sup>st</sup> century. Although people would have learned any language mostly for special reasons such as getting job or academic concerns, this case has seemed changes by means of increasing tourism, business and education, especially higher one, activities (Byram & Fleming, 2002). Therefore, this has brought itself many people travelling for ranked factors, and a new definition of culture and language learning flourished. However, our concern in this study is to delineate the process of how literature courses contribute to gain the features of target culture in learning English as a foreign language. Literary works reflect the nature of any society in which they have been written, thus readers may observe the cultural traits of that public in those studies. Even some authorities have regarded literature courses having cultural orientations, and it has been believed that literature would provide the learners familiar to target culture (Byram & Fleming, 2002, p. 32). If the prior studies are reviewed, it is witnessed that Bernard Lott (1988) dealt with the relationship between language and literature regarding the linguistic structures and literary criticism. On the other hand, Ana Gonçalves Matos (2009) discusses the relationship between literature and intercultural competence, a concept urged by Byram. She searches for establishing any foreign reader as an intercultural individual who may realise differences between his own culture and the target one as it is articulated by Byram (Byram & Fleming). Matos (2011) mostly emphasizes on the profits of reading literary texts in the target culture, thus the learners may develop somewhat any acknowledgement towards the intended culture. Besides, Matos handles the literary texts by placing them into foreign language classroom by trying to determine its efficiency in Portuguese secondary schools (2011). He still tries to put his views upon intercultural competence through stressing on the changes using literary texts in Portuguese classes. Although these texts were mostly used to indicate their linguistic features in the past,

the new paradigm in education initiated the process of regarding them as invaluable sources of cultural peculiarities of any society. Additionally, Tıkız and Çubukçu discuss the symbiotic relationship among literature, culture and language (2013). These two Turkish researchers uses the novel of “Never let me go” by Kazuo Ishiguro to assess the efficiency of literature through the theory of schema (Chastain, 1988). They resulted that learners became familiar with the target culture to a certain extent by means of above-mentioned literary work practiced through schema theory. All these studies have revealed the strong relationship between literature and culture by focusing on different perspectives. In this sense, present study deals with the role of literature in conveying the features of target culture, and how this process is realized during these courses. Literature courses in the department of English Language Teaching in the Education Faculty of Atatürk University has been determined as the case to be studied. The efficiency of literature courses given to students for three years have been identified, and interviews and observations have been conducted to uncover the process of gaining cultural properties through literary works. Moreover, while reviewing the literature, it has been detected that there are few studies regarding this subject in Turkish context. For this reason, the author believes that this study will contribute to the literature of culture and literature relationship at least concerning the Turkish context. Additionally, it is hoped that this study will bring a new perspective regarding the efficiency of literary courses especially in English Language and Teaching departments. While the departments of English Language and Literature are associated with literary courses due to their very nature, this situation may be neglected or misapplied in English Language Teaching departments.

## **2. METHOD**

This study was organized as descriptive qualitative study to explore the perceptions of EFL learners. The study’s research questions were designated as follows:

- How do the students of ELT department perceive the literature courses in providing them familiar to target culture (English Culture)?
- How do these literature courses contribute in establishing a sort of cultural environment?

### **2.1 Participants**

The participants were selected by the help of a colleague who has been working for three years and also completed her undergraduate and MA degrees in the same department. This brought the advantage of choosing the right individuals for study as much as the conditions enable. Before determining the participants, the author gave information to his colleague about the study and its aim, and asked for help to determine the appropriate participants. Therefore, above mentioned colleague established the qualified students who would contribute to study. Selected participants were preferred because of their interest in literature and their desire to join such a study. By doing so, four students were chosen to conduct interview while the author interviewed one more student before to carry out the pilot study. Three of the students were junior class, and one of them was senior. More students were chosen from the junior class because the senior class students were not

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interested in participating the study. The ages of the participants were in their twenties. Two of the students were male, and other two were female.

## **2.2 Data Collection**

Interview and observation data gathering techniques were used together both for reaching rich sources of data and confirming the obtained data through using both techniques. It is likely that this implication would enhance the validity of our study.

### **2.2.1 Interview**

Conducted interviews were designed as semi-structured because it was believed that this would bring flexibility to both researcher and participants. Because inquirer did have the chance of changing some questions or at least the rank of the questions, while this procedure enabled to measure the efficiency of determined questions. The interviews were carried out face to face, and they were both audio and video recorded. The questions began with the aim of understanding the perceptions of students towards literature and cultural studies. Following these questions, they have been asked to exemplify the relationship between literature and culture through the courses they attended nearly for three years. Interviews were performed in Turkish in order to let participants feel themselves relaxed and express their perceptions thoroughly.

### **2.2.2 Observation**

Observation practices were done in the course of "Literature and Language Teaching", the reason of why this course was chosen for observation was the belief to proficiency of the course regarding our topic, and the interviewers. Before observing the classes, instructor of the related course was informed about the study, and the researcher benefited from his views whether that course would be rich in terms of data gathering. After getting positive responses, the class was observed for four times. Each of the observation sessions continued nearly two hours, thus rich data were collected. Students, apart from the interviewers, were not informed about our study and the aim of observation. Although they interrogated the presence of researcher in the first attempts, they get accustomed to this process in the following process. The classes were mostly done in a naturalistic atmosphere and this facilitated the duty of inquirer. One other advantage of these observations was the presentations of students. Although the first observation was realized based on lecturing, following ones involved the presentations of students. Students were grouped by the instructor and their topic were determined before. In line with the focus of the course, all of the presentations were arranged emphasizing the language teaching process through literature. It is very likely that we encountered many examples and data regarding our topic. Novels, poems, theatrical plays, nursery rhymes and some other literary types of writings were the main elements of students in realising their presentations.

### 2.3 Data Analysis

The audio-taped interviews were transcribed verbatim by the researcher and checked the truthfulness of transcriptions for several times. Following this, explorer began to code the texts considering the related literature. This process required extracting some determined codes and add the new ones because the texts were coded for several times and these were controlled by the researcher. In addition, inquirer formed a code table listing all the codes used in the study, and one of the transcriptions was coded by one other colleague to enhance the validity of the study. It was detected that there was a great parallelism between the coding of researcher and the other colleague. Afterwards, categories and sub-categories were generated by the researcher regarding the prior studies and the data. Relationships were identified among the codes and categories.

### 3. FINDINGS

The results were reached through data obtained by means of interview and observation procedures. It has been determined that both of the data gathering techniques brought rich data related to the research problems of the study. Interview questions and observation data supported each other in detecting the perceptions of students towards gaining the properties of target culture through literature courses. The results were categorized as categories and sub-categories below:

Categories	Sub-categories
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Culture and Language Relationship</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>☞ Culture and language are interrelated</li> <li>☞ Lack of target culture affects language learning negatively</li> <li>☞ Language learning does not mean only acquiring lexical structures</li> <li>☞ Own culture of learners should be known to some degree to understand the target culture in a better way</li> </ul>

The first category is related to the relationship between culture and language during the language learning process. Students stated that they believe that these two points are essentially interrelated and language learning process cannot be considered if one of them is unavailable. Because culture and language influences each other throughout their developments.

“We learn their culture during language learning process. For instance, we are watching a film and our intention is to learn something about the language. However, we learn the target culture by observing how they dress, behave and eat. This is mostly encountered in films. We read books to learn the language and we experience how their funerals are, thus we acquire that they practice their funerals as it is pictured. Bodies are buried in our culture while they burn them. Culture and language are interrelated. We learn their culture while learning language”.

Additionally, it has been emphasized that language learning would become lacking if the culture of that language is not given to learners adequately. For instance, some structures and elements may become peculiar to target culture, thus it does not have any equivalent in our culture. Therefore, if we do not have enough acknowledge about the concerning point, something would be misunderstood. For example, present perfect tense do not have any equivalent in Turkish grammar, so learners should consider that grammatical structure in the context of English grammar. The following sentences refer to the statements of one of participants. She emphasizes that although Turkish culture has a meaningful context of gozleme, English culture do not involve any meaning regarding that concept. Therefore, this signifies the presence of such things among cultures.

“Gozleme is written in the paragraph, and I am looking up the dictionary for gozleme; it is equivalence is waffle. There is no relationship between these two things. Therefore, I could not translate gozleme for I do not know what the equivalence of gozleme in the target culture is”.

On the other hand, students signified that learners may obtain the cultural features of target language unconsciously during learning process by being exposed to materials regarding the language learning, thus culture becomes the inseparable part of language learning. In this manner, culture is prioritized with its hidden and secret formations which can be coded and understood by a group of people acknowledging about that group of symbols.

“Although we do not teach English or learn it in our daily lives, we are always hold by them. Sometimes, we do use a word even if we are completely unaware of it”.

“For instance, we are looking at the examples; he says “I went to bar yesterday”. We do not generally use “bar” in giving example sentences, however they aim the significance of bar in their culture by using it in such an example, and this reflects the tendency of going bar in their lives. Therefore, we can obtain their culture unconsciously. We gain the features of their culture when we suppose learning grammar, or we assume that we are speaking but we are reflecting their culture”.

Next, participants indicated that language learning does not mean only acquiring the lexical structures of any language, and learners should know something about the target culture to understand the context and generate meaningful sentences. Although somebody knows the grammatical rules, vocabularies and how to pronounce them to a certain extent, it becomes unfruitful when the culture is neglected. Following excerpt refers this situation:

“It is impossible to understand any language by divorcing the cultural features of that language. Because you cannot understand that language with your own view, you should have enough knowledge in considering the sentences in line with the perspectives of target culture. For instance, we do not use “please” in our conversations. However, it is a kind of rudeness while please is not used at the end of sentences. Therefore, students should acquire the source of this usage, otherwise it is absurd to instruct students in using such kind of structures”.

Besides, foreign language learners should know something about their own culture both for comparing them and facilitating the acquiring process of target culture by finding the equivalents of any structure in his own culture.

“However, we should not lose our cultural features. I think that we should learn the target culture by keeping our core features, and thus agreeing with the other culture. We should know what a gozleme is in our culture, a wedding and a henna night because these are not available in the target culture. Moreover, we should get acknowledged about whether they have some different practices before the wedding, and they made henna night”.

In this manner, some of the students uttered that learners should become aware of their own culture as much as they do not lose their cultural traditions while acquiring the target culture. Otherwise, they would probably lose their own features related to culture and this may lead to corruption in both cultural conventions and learning process.

Categories	Codes
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Literature and Language</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Literature supports language learning</li> <li>Literary works exemplify the structures learned in the class</li> </ul>

The second category refers the association of literature and language. According to the responses of the participants, it is clear that they believe in the contribution of literature to language learning in a positive way. For instance, they state that they may find many linguistic structures in any literary work, and this prompts them to witness these structures.

“When our teachers ask us to read some literary works for the next week, we get informed about grammar, lexical features and culture of the target language. We gain insight about different aspects of that language by means of any artistic work”.

Besides, it is expressed that literary works help them in experiencing new and rich sources of linguistic patterns, thus they have the chance of increasing their vision concerning target language. Students have also expressed that literary works provide chances for their witnessing the different types of structures and vocabularies they could not encounter in their daily life. This point brings an academic way of view which may be gained through literary works.

“It really affects me that literature gives many things all together. For instance, you write a poem or read, and you can see many things related to language.

Literature develops language and you begin to form your own style”.

Categories	Codes
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Literature and Culture</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Literature reflects the culture in which it has been written</li> <li>Each literary work gives information about the culture of the period in which it was written</li> <li>Literary works facilitate to observe the differences between cultures.</li> </ul>

The last category involves the literature and culture relationship, and to what extent they influence each other. Literature and culture are regarded as merged into each other by students because the literary works naturally reflect the cultural characteristics of any nation and period. For this reason, literature is an important device in acquiring the target culture. They contend that they may get information regarding any particular period by reading any literary work belonging to that time as the literary works use the people as significant sources of their context. In addition, learners may find some differences between their own cultures and the target one. Therefore, the learner reaches the opportunity of acquiring target culture by comparing it with his own.

“Everybody reflects himself in literary works.

The author gives clues about himself in his works. When we read, we easily understand what kind of personality that individual had, in which period he lived, what are the cultural characteristics he had”.

For instance, participants uttered that they learnt the social life and ruling system of Renaissance period from Shakespeare's works. In this context, King Lear refers to the ruling principles of that period and how a king was important for any country at that time. In addition, the relationships between daughter and father is observed concretely in the mentioned work. Therefore, they can get the related information of that period through reading the works of Shakespeare. Through this process, the students internalize the peculiarities of target culture by deliberately or unconsciously.

"How are the life in there, that is, he was mentioning about a wine shop. How the life of people working in that shop took place, how that though flourished and how it affected the life of those people. It showed me the different parts. I acquired it deeply rather than learning the dates and the context of the cases such as nationalism."

Moreover, some participants indicated that these literary works gained them some different perspectives in assessing different cultures as the richness of whole humanity, thus they learned to respect other cultures while learning new things about them.

Any person living in any other part of the world, he grew up in a different culture. However, he respects our way of taking our shoes off. When foreign people come to our houses, they take their shoes off, and we do not take our shoes off when we go their houses. Everybody respects each other's cultures. In my opinion, the cultural differences connect people to each other. I do not think that such healthy communications would be established if everybody lives in the same culture.

#### 4. CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION

The rise of communicative language teaching method enabled the incorporation of culture into the language teaching process. However, this procedure entailed more endeavor than expected to reach the desired results. The first steps were taken by defining the culture in line with the changing conditions of the time and designing the curriculum and way of thinking through this method. Within this period, literary works have been discovered as invaluable sources of cultural features of target language. In this manner, many studies have been conducted to facilitate gaining the culture of target language through literature. Our study represents one of them in Turkish context concerning teaching English as a foreign language in higher education. This study revealed that there is a strong relationship between literature and culture as it has been subjected by some prior studies (Hall, 2005) (Matos, 2011) (Paige, Jorstad, Siaya, Klein, & Colby, 2000). The very nature of literary works in reflecting the culture of the nation in which it has been written is an important factor in providing such a relationship. This may also be related to the writer because the author is also a human being, thus he has feelings, conventions and a unique way of thinking. These

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elements would influence the works generated by authors. In addition, they should somewhat reflect the situations realizing in their periods, and they thus add something related to their own character in terms of style, and way of presentation. On the other hand, the participants uttered that being informed about the target culture facilitates the learning process of any foreign language because any language does not involve only lexical structures to establish communication. This result is affirmed by the studies of McCafferty (2010), Matos (2011) and Hanauer (2001). Referring to this point, Mc Cafferty urges that reading literary texts provide learners to become familiar with the features of target culture since they likely encounter daily expressions, cultural traits and traditions of the nation whose language they are learning, thus they have the chance of internalizing the target culture to certain extent. Matos (2011) supports this notion in signifying the role of literary texts to broaden the perspective of learners and becoming somewhat credible sources of target culture. She adds that it is highly likely that any instructor or individual may add something related to his/her own view in delineating the cultural features of target language, yet literary works reduce this possibility to a lower degree. Hanauer also establishes proofs of this way of thinking by discussing his task of focus-on-cultural understanding based upon urging the learners to read some literary works and then interpreting them. Then, native speakers, who also acknowledge the target culture and the way of interpreting literary works to some degree, analyses the related works. The interpretations of learners are checked with the later one and the required feedback is given to them. This process enables the learner to become familiar with the target culture to a certain extent. He tries to understand the efficiency of this theory by asking some Jewish and Christian Israelis to interpret some part of New Testament. It has been reached that each of the members of mentioned communities interpreted the excerpt in line with their own religion and cultural features. One more interesting finding is obtaining the cultural traits unconsciously by means of being exposed to them. Learners expressed this notion and they referred that this is natural in language learning procedure. Hall (2005) puts forward this view by stating that becoming familiar with a culture entails beyond literary texts, traditions and taken for granted activities. It should involve capturing the way of thinking, encoding the cultural signs embedded in the depths of that culture.

“Learning a second language is not about simply learning new linguistic forms, but it is about learning how to construct, exchange, and interpret signs that have been created by someone else” (Lantolf 2000: 22; cited in Hall, 2005).

“[F]oreign language learners do not just learn the language, they are also constantly engaged in judging the relevance, validity, pertinence or usefulness of this or that bit of knowledge, this or that assignment, thus staking out the phenomenological field of their learning endeavour” (ibid.: 11; cited in Hall, 2005).

On the other hand, participants indicated the importance of being acknowledging about their own culture so as to better acquire the target culture and make comparison between two cultures. When reading the related literature, it has been encountered that this way of thinking somewhat equals to the term of “intercultural competence” urged by Kramersch and Byram (2002). They express that the tendency of imitating the native speakers and becoming like them replaced with being intercultural speaker following the rise of communicative language teaching. Therefore, foreign or second language learners have been urged to gain the target culture by means of realizing the similarities and differences between their own and target culture. This would also bring a sort of better development of cultural awareness without imitating the native speakers. In this manner, Kramersch propels that a third perspective emerges through this procedure along with native culture, foreign culture and a mix of both of these. This point has been accepted by the authorities as the model of gaining features of target culture. Therefore, our participants emphasize this point likely because of their observations of someone imitating the native culture and reducing himself to the degree of parrot.

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