

Developing Intercultural Understanding in Teacher Education Curricula through TV Commercials ¹

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Abstract

This paper suggests that media sources should be integrated into teacher training curricula in order to avoid prejudices and to have a better understanding of another culture. Based on related literature a 14-week-study was designed at Kocaeli University, Faculty of Education. This study aimed at creating a new context through which pre-service teachers improve their awareness through another culture and a deeper understanding of and appreciation for that culture by means of TV commercials. The study was conducted with 118 second grade pre-service teachers enrolled in English Language Teaching (ELT) classes at Kocaeli University, Turkey. During the study, integrated into an elective course, students were shown TV commercials and they were made to analyze them based on a framework consisting of varied questions which helped the students to get an idea about another culture on their own without being influenced. In this descriptive study, students were given an adjective list prepared after a pilot study and they were made to tick the adjectives that they thought were the most suitable one/ones for that culture. The most and least repeated five adjectives were listed in accordance with their frequency both at the beginning and at the end of the study. This study showed that students involved in the study had changed their attitudes from being negative towards another culture to positive.

Key Words: Media Analysis, Teacher Education Curriculum, Intercultural Understanding, TV commercials in education

Introduction

The Culture of Peace is a set of values, attitudes, modes of behaviour and ways of life that reject violence and prevent conflicts by tackling their root causes to solve problems through dialogue and negotiation among individuals, groups and nations, as defined by the United Nations. For peace and non-violence to prevail, we need to foster a culture of peace through education by revising the educational curricula to promote qualitative

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values, attitudes and behaviours of a culture of peace³. Intercultural understanding has been a key element in peace education. Many opportunities for education and human development are being undermined by the lack of tolerance and intercultural understanding, upon which peace is founded.

The "Life-long learning" concept rests on four pillars; *Learning to know, learning to do, learning for life, learning to live together*. *Learning to live together* involves developing an understanding for the history, traditions and values of fellow people. This will enable people to develop a new awareness leading them into solving insurmountable conflicts in an intelligent and peaceful way (UNESCO, 1997). However, when we talk about intercultural understanding, we may face a very big problematic area; stereotypes.

Stereotypes do not present an accurate picture of a new culture. As a matter of fact, stereotypes are extremely tenacious, in so far as people from different cultures have their own schemata through which they conceptualise and understand the world, and to step into another culture is 'to deny something within their own being' (Byram et al., 1994, p. 43). For example, Valette (1986) states that culture in the foreign language classroom are likely to be sketchy and shallow- in other words, the wrong type of information is taught. Students are generally exposed to only superficial cultural information like geography, food, art, music and history, which are simply not enough to teach them to understand, appreciate and respect another culture. It may result in students having negative attitudes towards another culture rather than developing appreciation. For that reason, foreign language teachers, for example, reduce culture to what Kramsch (1991, p. 217) calls "the four Fs" – "foods, fairs, folklore and statistical facts", which is why most students remain mono-cultural and ethnocentric even after years of foreign language study (Lantolf, 1999). However, values, ideals, conceptions and communicative norms are much more important for understanding what people say and how they act (Ratiu & Rodgers, 1984).

Considering the importance of developing intercultural understanding may lead to another issue; the methodology used in the classroom for developing intercultural

³ A/RES/53/243, (1998). Declaration and Programme of Action on a Culture of Peace. Retrieved at http://www3.unesco.org/iycp/uk/uk_sum_cp.htm. 21.12.2007

understanding. In order to provide a different perspective on the new culture, teachers should use comparison, with a view to identifying common ground or even lacunae within or between cultures (Byram et al., 1994). By emphasizing the cultural content, teachers can help students to accept the legitimacy of cultural differences among themselves. Integration of the study of culture with the regular curriculum serves the purpose of developing cultural awareness, and reinforcing tolerance, a deeper understanding of and appreciation for the richness of diverse cultures. The media provides an excellent source for discovering a “new” place and making our students more culturally competent. In her study, Lee (1998) found that using the media such as newspapers in language instruction not only helps students advance their knowledge of current lexical items and idiomatic expressions but increases their ability to interpret, analyze, synthesize and evaluate cultural texts beyond the comprehension of simple facts. Not only newspapers, but also visual media such as films, TV commercials, and documentaries provides an appropriate environment in which cultural awareness is developed.

The media used in this study is TV commercials. The reasons for using TV commercials for cultural understanding are as follows:

1. Commercials are authentic materials; since they are “not designed solely for classroom use but rather for native speakers” (Cummins, 1989, p. 412), they reflect an accurate knowledge of the society and the people who live in it. They help learners to connect to native speakers because, as Melvin and Stout (1987, p. 52) affirm, they help them to experience places known to native speakers, and capture sounds and sights as well as nonverbal behaviour of native speakers.
2. Commercials have advantages over other media such as radio, newspapers, magazines or movies. They provide current spoken language, which is often reinforced by repetitions and musical tunes, as well as visual slogans on the screen. Recorded commercials can be played back and stopped to suit the individual pedagogical needs (Lawrence, 1987).

3. They are "short, focused, and thematic in content" (Davis, 1995, p. 1) or as Lynch (1985, p. 119) affirms, "Television advertisements display various characteristics (limited duration, verbal repetition, completeness of story)". They provide a visual context, making it easier for learners to understand the language, according to Davis (1997) (quoted in Picken, 1999, p. 250).
4. They use language that exposes learners to "slang, language registers, reduced speech, idiomatic expressions, and suprasegmental features of intonation and stress common in the speech of native speakers" (Smith and Rawley, 1997, p. 2).
5. They motivate learners since learners enjoy them. According to the results of a study by Chavez (1998) on learner's perspectives on authenticity, learners view authentic materials as essential to language learning and enjoyable.

Based on related literature a 14-week-study was designed at Kocaeli University, Faculty of Education. That study was aimed at creating a new context through which pre-service teachers develop their ability to improve their awareness through a new culture and a deeper understanding of and appreciation for a new culture by means of TV commercials.

Method

This study is a descriptive one. It was conducted with 118 2nd grade pre-service teachers enrolled in the English Language Teaching department at Kocaeli University, Turkey. The English Language Teaching department was used as a sample in this study because the course in which this study was implemented is an elective course in the ELT department which is focused mainly on the media and language education. Since the students were familiar with the English culture, a comparatively new culture was planned for students to take into consideration. Before the study, 50 students selected randomly from different departments and grades were asked to write five nations they like most and five nations they like least. From the two Balkan countries repeated most among the ones liked least, Bulgaria was taken as the subject of the study. The reason for choosing Bulgarian culture

among from these five is related to the fact that there have been some historical conflicts between Bulgaria and Turkey in both ancient and recent history. Secondly, in their study Bilgin & Aksoy (1993) found that Bulgaria is one of the least liked country by Turkish people. Thirdly, among these five countries the only language that can be translated into Turkish for the researchers' nearest environment was Bulgarian language. TV commercials from Bulgaria were translated into Turkish by a bilingual university lecturer at History department at Kocaeli University.

At the beginning of the term participants of the study were asked to write adjectives that they think about the Balkan people in three minutes in order to determine their understanding of the Balkan people as a whole. They wrote adjectives on a piece of paper without any limitations. The most repeated 100 adjectives were listed in accordance with their frequency. After this step, the most frequent 50 adjectives were chosen in order to make a standard classroom list. The criteria used in order to make a standard classroom list are as follows (Bilgin, 1999):

1. The criteria for frequency. The adjectives selected from the main list by at least 5% of the students were put in the standard list.
2. The criteria for being specific. The adjectives related solely "to love" or "to hate" were eliminated.
3. The criteria for qualification. It is vital to provide a balance in the standard classroom list. That is why, 20 adjectives with a positive meaning, 20 adjectives with a negative meaning and 10 adjectives with a neutral meaning were added in the list.

After the second step, students were required to put a tick against the adjectives in the standard list that applied for Bulgarian people for this time. The most repeated and the least repeated five adjectives for Bulgarian people were listed in accordance with their frequency both at the beginning and at the end of the study.

After the first practice of the test, TV commercials produced in Turkey and Bulgaria were shown implemented in one of their elective courses in their curriculum. An LCD projector and a laptop were already available for use in the classroom. Prior to the study, the participants were informed that their participation to the study was voluntary, and their answers would not affect their course grades in any way. Each week, only two commercials for the similar type of the product (one from native culture, the other from the target culture) were shown to the students. For example, if a TV commercial about a bank was chosen from Turkey, a TV commercial about a bank was also chosen from Bulgaria in the same week. Since the students did not know the Bulgarian language, TV commercials with Turkish subtitles were provided. Each week students were made to analyze the commercials based on a list of questions (in the Appendix) adapted by researchers based on related literature. Those questions were corrected and confirmed by three experts on Department of Communication, Department of Sociology and department of Language teaching. The students studied in groups and analyzed TV commercials by discussing or sharing their ideas by answering the questions in groups. The only thing that the instructor and the first researcher in the study as well did was to listen to them and ask follow-up questions such as “What made you think that?”, “How can you define it?” and so on. She neither corrected their answers nor commented on them.

Findings

It is expected that if a person has a positive attitude towards another culture, he chooses adjectives with positive ideas and if he has negative ideas towards another culture, he chooses adjectives with negative ideas. At the beginning of the study, the five adjectives used most for Bulgarian people were given in Table 1 with their frequencies and percentages. Since students were allowed to tick more than one adjective, the total number of students was not given but the percentage of the scores attributed to the total number was given.

Table 1. Frequencies and percentages of adjectives used most for Bulgarian people by Turkish students at the beginning.

Bulgarian People	Frequency	Percentage
Racist	40	33,90
Sullen	50	42,37
Ungrateful/ Unthankful	45	38,17
Underdeveloped	26	22,03
Unfriendly	30	25,42

At first practice of the test, the five adjectives used least for Bulgarian people are shown in Table 2 with their frequencies and percentages.

Table 2. Frequencies and percentages of adjectives used least for Bulgarian people by Turkish students at the end of study.

Bulgarian People	Frequency	Percentage
Hospitable	5	4,24
Avaricious, Acquisitive	5	4,24
Reveller	4	3,39
Ambitious	2	1,69
Neat	4	3,39

If we expect positive attitudes towards another culture, it is obvious that we expect that the most repeated adjectives should be positive whereas the least repeated ones should be negative. When the results of the first application of the test were analysed, we can realize that the five adjectives associated with Bulgarian people in the most repeated part can be regarded as negative adjectives. Two of the least repeated adjectives have positive (neat and hospitable) value, two of them can be called neutral (ambitious and reveller); and one of them is negative (Avaricious/ Acquisitive). One can conclude that participants of the study have negative attitudes towards Bulgarian people at the beginning of the study.

At the end of the study, the same adjective list was given to the students. The results are given in Table 3 for the most repeated adjectives.

Table 3. Frequencies and percentages of the most repeated adjectives at the end of the study.

Bulgarian People	Frequency	Percentage
Neat	50	42,37
Self- indulgent	38	32,20
Reveller	40	33,90
Nationalist	59	50
Tolerant	48	40,68

The results are given in Table 4 for the most repeated adjectives.

Table 4. Frequencies and percentages of least repeated adjectives at the end of the study.

Bulgarian People	Frequency	Percentage
Hospitable	6	5,08
Underdeveloped	8	6,78
Obscurant	3	2,54
Trickster	4	3,39
Ignorant	2	1,69

When Table 1 and Table 2 are analysed, we can realize that students' attitudes towards Bulgarian people and culture has considerably changed. We can conclude that two adjectives (tolerant and neat) associated with Bulgarian people in the most repeated part can be regarded as positive, and three of them are neutral (reveller, self-indulgent, nationalist). None of the adjectives in the most repeated part in the first practice of the test were chosen by the students at the end of the study. One interesting result is that although "neat" is used in the least repeated part at the beginning of the study, it is in the most repeated one at the end of the study. Four of the least repeated adjectives in the second practice of the test (Underdeveloped, Obscurant, Trickster and Ignorant) have negative value, and one of them is positive (Hospitable). This also shows that the attitude of students towards Bulgarian people has changed from negative to positive or at least neutral. "Hospitable" is the only adjective which stays almost the same at the end of the study. This is probably because they did not draw conclusions about their being hospitable or not from the TV commercials that the researchers chose or the idea of being hospitable is different in each nation.

Conclusion

In order to sustain peace, it is vital to provide for teachers with suitable classroom environments to develop cultural awareness and mutual understandings. Culture refers to beliefs, values, attitudes, and traditions shared by members of a community. No culture is better than other cultures; they just differ from one another. The purpose of teaching culture to students is neither to make them feel that their culture is less important than the target culture, nor to impose the target culture on them, nor to make them suffer from culture shock, nor to make them create a new culture. Implementing media resources, especially TV commercials, into the teacher education curriculum is one of the most effective ways to create a classroom climate in which intercultural awareness or tolerance is developed. In order to develop that climate in our classroom, we should make our students avoid stereotypes and get an accurate knowledge about another culture. Authentic materials open doors to cultural information that students may otherwise never have the chance of experiencing. Media is a powerful tool in order to develop awareness through cultures because they are created for their own nations and therefore, they reflect their society in a more accurate way. Advertising can be a key element in providing this up-to-date experience. Advertising materials can be used in realistic communicative scenarios and settings for students to complete real-world tasks and other related activities. Implementation of such material at the appropriate level demonstrates to students that they can navigate within and understand “real” language and culture. Advertising mirrors culture and they should be used in the classrooms not only for analyzing a foreign culture but also their own culture. Students can analyze advertisements from both the target culture and native culture, then compare and discuss these advertisements in class. It may help students to understand target culture’s point of view. In this study, we can conclude that pre-service teachers of English have changed their attitude towards Bulgarian culture by means of TV commercials. Some courses based on media resources should be developed as a discrete course or should be implemented into the regular curriculum in an interdisciplinary manner. In addition, it is suggested that the reasons behind that prejudice towards another culture should be investigated in further studies.

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Appendix

Analyzing Advertisements—Individual Work

NAME: _____

DATE: _____

PRODUCT: _____

COMPANY: _____

TARGET AUDIENCE: (age, gender, social status, education level, etc.)

Theme/Themes: _____

Place (Where does the commercial take place and what significance does this background have?):

This is an analysis of the following character in my advertisement:

1. Description of Visual Images/Sound

(Describe in detail what you see/hear.)

2. Verbal/Non-verbal Message

3. Hidden (inferential) Message

(What does this ad promise its potential buyer?)

Adapted from: McGee, K. & Fujita, T. (2000).