

# Understanding the Role of Cultural Practices in an English Major

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Learning a second language entails being immersed in the culture where this language is spoken. The present study aims at exploring the role teaching culture plays within the study plan of the English major (*Bachillerato en Inglés*, in Spanish), program affiliated to Escuela de Literatura y Ciencias del Lenguaje, from Universidad Nacional, and developed by Sede Interuniversitaria de Alajuela. Students and professors from the four levels informed on different cultural teaching practices applied in their courses. Learners' knowledge toward culture is determined through a questionnaire, as to obtain results related to attitudes they may have when learning about cultural aspects. Likewise, interviews with professors were administered to explore approaches to culture and to detect teaching strategies applied in their classes.

Different elements of culture teaching and learning have become crucial components in EFL instruction. However, the cultural elements are commonly minimized and, in some cases, wrongly left aside by the purpose of teaching language content, skills or areas in a decontextualized fashion. The interest of including cultural aspects in textbooks, materials, and courses has increased noticeably as a way to help students to get immersed in the underlying aspects of any language. Tang refers to what the goals of cultural learning in foreign language education should be, given the eminent relationship between language and culture. If language is best learned through communication, and if language is the vehicle to culture, then an equation can be traced between culture and communication, as indicated by this author:

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Behavioral culture, particularly, has attracted vast attention from FL [foreign language] pedagogues because it is found that an integral part of human communications whose meaning often do not lie in the linguistic items but in the social and cultural context as well in the physical evidence of proxemics, kinetics, and other paralinguistic modalities. (87)

As a conclusion, language learning is enhanced if myriad of cultural components in foreign language communicative classrooms.

Another reason why culture should be included in syllabi, particularly in an EFL one, is that learners' perspectives and world knowledge broaden per se. Henze explains that reforms in curricular approaches can minimize the gap between what learners may perceive unknown or even awkward, and what they may find fascinating in terms of cultural knowledge broadening.

The present study gathered data from 32 students from the first level, 13 students from the second level, 16 students from the third level, and 13 students from the fourth level in the *Bachillerato en Inglés* (BI). Regarding their background, all 74 students, being the sample population, are from Costa Rica. In order to pursue their bachelor's degree, they must approve 132 university credits, from which 105 are compulsory and taught in the target language. Two courses specifically approach culture as subject matter, and one course integrates culture and literature from the United States; the rest of the BI courses focused on different skills and areas of the language. In relation to the faculty members, all eleven BI professors are Costa Rican hold a degree in EFL teaching or English itself.

Above all, BI learners have opportunities to explore culture from different places through the instruction of the target language in their EFL classes. The scope of this study sheds light of the implication of culture integrated into language learning, by developing the following objectives:

- To find out about the students' knowledge of culture learning within BI's curriculum.
- To identify positive and negative attitudes toward learning about the target culture in different courses.
- To detect methodological strategies applied by EFL professors for the teaching of culture.



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## Presenters' Biographies

Professor Ligia Espinoza holds a master's degree in Second Languages and Cultures with an emphasis in Teaching English as a Foreign Language for Adults from Universidad Nacional. She has worked as an EFL professional at secondary, language schools and university levels for over 20 years, as a teacher. She currently works in the English major offered at sede interuniversitaria de Alajuela, from Universidad Nacional. Her research areas of interests include culture teaching, error correction, and language variabilities, from which she has published her work in journals such as *Revista de Lenguas Modernas*.

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