LANGUAGE AND CULTURE VS LANGUAGE AS A MEDIUM OF COMMUNICATION: THE ATTITUDE TOWARDS THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE TODAY

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Abstract:In most recent years, a new topic of debate has been the focus of attention for many English teachers and foreign language methodologists. With the development of the Internet and technology, along with the increasing number of universities that offer English study programs for international students, foreign language teachers have realized that the traditional methods of teaching the English language may no longer fit the needs of the today's learners. English has become the lingua franca of many fields today and this has undoubtedly brought many changes in the way people perceive the study of the English language. The English language itself has come to have a new role in the new economy of things. It has become the lingua franca of many international universities. When used in such contexts, English is mainly perceived as a medium of communication and can no longer be identified with a specific cultural group. On the other hand, there are still students who learn English for academic purposes. In the latter context, people still need to be able to recognize the cultural element in the study of the language The aim of this paper is to show ways in which the English teachers have to adapt to these internationally oriented curricula, knowing that they are an important tool in the process of making the students successful in their approach to learn a foreign language.

Keywords: English language, language, culture, lingua franca, higher education.

For more than forty years now, the process of studying foreign languages has been analyzed by linguists who have improved the way in which we perceive the idea of teaching and learning foreign languages today. Our students have become aware of the importance of developing the four skills in a foreign language (reading, writing, listening, speaking), understanding, at the same time, the complexities required by the use of a foreign language in the cultural context where it is produced. In other words, students are nowadays aware of the presence of the cultural element in the study of a foreign language and are able to detect it not only as a separate element in language, but rather to detect its presence in all the above-mentioned skills that one needs to possess in order to call himself / herself a proficient user of that foreign language. Generally speaking, when it comes to the teaching of foreign languages, things are the same. The English language has undergone some new changes and challenges especially since technology has witnessed such and amazing and rapid development. Thus today many people use English in many fields of activity. English has become the medium of communication for many people, in different cultural contexts. Therefore, in more recent years English has come to be regarded as the language that can and should be taught without making any reference to cultural elements as its purpose is to be used in culture free contexts, when the reference to a specific cultural background is absent. English has become a sort of a neuter language that anyone can use or make it his / her own. The aim of this paper is to question the above-mentioned issue, whether in the new economy of things, when the English language has indeed become the lingua franca of many fields, English is only a tool that helps in the process and mechanism of communication for millions of people around the world and the Internet.

Today there are many voices that argue that even when taught for academic purposes, the English language should be approached without much emphasis on the cultural element. Their first argument to support this idea is that in the case of the English language it is too hard anyway to establish whose culture should be taught, taking into account the fact that there are so many English-speaking environments. Furthermore, in the new globalized world, with such a diverse population, people no longer take into account the element of culture and the English language they use is nothing but a tool, people making use of a rather limited number of words to exchange in order to make themselves understood. We believe that this is rather a simplistic perspective and in reality things are not that superficial. First of all it is important to establish what the contexts in which the English language is used today are. If we refer to the academic context, there are at least two important directions in which the English language is used. When used for academic purposes, students all over the world, in universities, study English at an advanced level and, most of the times English is also studied for specific purposes (English for Specific Purposes - ESP). Most modern theories have emphasized the fact that the study of ESP should not limit itself to the study of specialized vocabulary only. Studying ESP is perceived today as a more complex process that views the language in the context of the students' future profession. Therefore it primarily has a communicative purpose. Also, a common chapter in the study of ESP (no matter the students' field of interest) is Academic Writing. Writing, as a productive skill, is a complex thing that has to be taught and students should become aware, form the very beginning, that the element of culture is present everywhere in the written text. Even such documents as the application forms carry with them elements of culture. If the CV, for instance, does not come with many cultural challenges, how vocabulary is used in context becomes an important issue. Terminology differs very much from what we have in the Romanian language and their equivalents in the English language (our students may find it difficult to translate such terms as "licențiat", "lucrare de diplomă" (BA / BS, BA / BS paper). The letter of application and the personal statement already come with more challenging things for Romanian users of the English language, from a cultural point of view. In the Romanian system the letter of application is not valued as much as in the British system, for instance, therefore Romanian applicants may not treat it with the utmost care when they design it and write it. Some other things they should know is that it is no longer appropriate to address such a letter to a woman calling her either "Mrs" or "Miss", but rather to use the neuter term "Ms" that does not reveal the woman's marital status. Personal statements are still not that much used in our university admission system. Even the way in which this was translated into Romanian is misleading, indicating a letter ("scrisoare de motivație") and not an essay. Of course, examples could go on up with the fact that we do not have a culture of designing and planning our future, so this might be a challenge for the Romanian applicant who has to write an entire paragraph devoted to the way in which he / she sees himself / herself within five or ten years. These are simple examples as difficulties really come along when we deal with more sophisticated pieces of writing such as essays or dissertations. In scientific writing, besides the fact that terminology may differ from one cultural context to another, and the author's use of the English language (as anon-native speaker) may be very different from what a native speaker would use mainly because the tendency is to follow the pattern in the mother tongue. Above all these, written communication as such is influenced by the author's cultural background. Here, by cultural background, we should understand things such as the author's educational background, the fact that the author may have different writing expectations, the relationship with the supervisor (if we speak about students who have to write dissertations or PhD candidates who write their PhD theses), and different ways of using methodologies. Therefore, when they have to produce such texts for different cultural contexts, authors should check the institution's requirements and follow them to the letter. The advantage of a

written text, though, is that it can be proofread and revised until the author is satisfied with it (another good tip for our students is to make them understand the importance of writing all these texts directly in the English language).

As we have already said, in the context of studying ESP, the English language is very much used for communicative purposes. It is here, probably, the most challenging aspect of using a language in its cultural context. If we refer to our experience of teaching ESP to medical students, then we have to mention the doctors' ability to communicate with patients with whom they do not share a cultural background. Our students may choose to carry out their profession abroad, therefore they have to understand the impact culture has on healthcare settings. If we refer to English-speaking environments, our future doctors need to understand their patients' language, accent and dialect. Throughout the doctor-patient encounter there are many instances misunderstanding, because of cultural issues, may occur. Therefore doctors have to be trained to have good communication skills. All aspects of the communication process (verbal and nonverbal communication, active listening, paralanguage and cultural awareness) have to be explained and understood in the context of healthcare settings. When they are used in a different cultural context, they all carry supplementary cultural information. If this cultural information is not properly understood, the whole doctor-patient encounter may be ruined and this will lead to misunderstanding, misdiagnosis and eventually incorrect treatment.

Verbal communication is essential in doctor-patient communication. Throughout the medical interview, the information given by the doctor must be accurate, complete and relevant. Doctors have to be able to adapt their language, in other words, to use lay terms that patient can understand. The doctor also has to be a good active listener, especially during the first part of the interview, when he / she listens to the patient's complaint. Specialists say that 80% of the diagnosis is established when the doctor listens to the patient's story. This is the moment the doctor gathers his / her information. Nonverbal behavior also plays an important part throughout the medical consultation. In order to show that they are listening, doctors may nod the head, make eye contact, or make an appropriate use of posture. Doctors also have to be able to pick up cues that would indicate any sign of discomfort or anxiety. Nonetheless, by means of the same type of communication, doctors should be aware that they could also send such nonverbal messages to their patients who may misinterpret them. Doctors should also pay attention to such details as, if they do not share the same cultural background with the patient. Also, when obtaining information on the patient's general health, doctors should pay attention to the way in which they formulate and ask their questions. Patients may become sensitive when they speak about some aspects of their lives: marital status, sexual orientation, domestic violence, drinking habits, sources of stress, use of drugs. Questions should be asked with care and formulated in such a way that they would not become offensive. The idea of politeness may differ from one context to another, therefore when they give instruction to their patients, they should also be careful (the use of the so-called "softeners" is recommended – words such as *can*, *could*, *just*, *please* really help in making instructions sound less tough: "*Could you just open your mouth, please!*" instead of "*Open your mouth!*".

Likewise, doctors who come from Eastern Europe may have a hard time in making the patient his / her partner in discussing the treatment plan or how the disease should be managed. Any attempt to change a patient's lifestyle may have a huge impact upon him / her. Therefore doctors should not force their opinions on their patients, but rather to present them with some options from which the patient is expected to choose. The options need to be patient-centered, taking into account the patient's way of life and the whole context he / she might find himself in. Doctors should let their patients see that their beliefs are taken into account. If there are still some misunderstandings because of the cultural differences, the doctors should talk with their patients in order to solve these issues. Throughout the medical

interview, doctors should show respect for cultural differences. They should not sound judgmental and they should not make any assumptions about the patients' beliefs.

If we refer to the second direction in which the English language has come to be used, then we have to mention the higher education that makes use of the language as a medium of communication and instruction. We speak about international universities that offer English study programs for international students all over the world. This has developed as a rather recent direction in the new globalized teaching system as students now can travel and this mobility has facilitated this exchange of students among universities in Europe and not only. Universities which have adopted English study programs have thus easily become international. Once universities introduced these international programs, they had to be able to adapt to the new challenges. We can state from the very beginning that the English study programs have proven to be more challenging than the French ones (because of the lack of homogeneity of the students who came to study in English as a foreign language – in the case of the French study programs, most of the times, students are native speakers of the language or at least use French as a second language, so the French cultural background is shared). Students studying in the English language are more diverse, they come to attend such programs from very different cultural backgrounds. Therefore their perspectives upon the world may be very different. Even the use of the English language is very different from one student to another. Though the purpose of our paper is not to discuss the ways in which universities have benefited from the use of such programs, maybe it is worth mentioning a study carried out by the British Council (The Center for Research and Development in English Medium Instructed) in 2014 which outlines some of these advantages: "the ability to teach a class of mixed nationalities through the medium of English means that universities can attract high fee-paying international students. It also means that universities can produce high quality research papers in English, helping them move up in international ranking" (www.teachingenglish.org.uk – Dearden 2014). The study which is detailed by Julie Dearden in her paper **English as a medium of instruction – a growing global phenomenon**, is an accurate description of the ways in which implementation of EMI (English as a medium for instruction), to see if this English is in any way different from Standard English. The study also touched upon more sensitive aspects of this implementation, discussing things like the implications of teacher education, teacher educators and material developers, the language problems associated to the process, what levels of English proficiency enable teachers / professors to provide quality instruction in their respective academic subjects, how deep students can learn students performance in EMI content learning, up to more sophisticated ways of understanding this complex process, such as: the psycholinguistic and sociolinguistic effects on students' home language resulting from EMI used in various stages of education.

Undoubtedly we can interpret this thing as the response universities had towards globalization. Nonetheless, it hard to generalize things, as all these adaptations to the new systems and requirements have taken place based on the needs dictated by each particular context. It is self-understood that the way in which English was introduced as a medium of communication also differs upon the context. Teachers and professors come from different cultural contexts and they have to find a common ground in order to find solutions to communicate. It is obvious that the pattern in which they studied and learnt the English language also differs, along with the grammar pattern they use. Thus we have to emphasize one important thing from the very beginning. In order to be able to teach in such English programs or, as a student, to register to them, both teachers and students need to have at least the B2 level in the English language. The B2 level enables them to communicate effectively in the English language, without the need to go deeper in the cultural contexts offered by English speaking environments. In other words, such non-native speakers have not reached that level when, besides the acquisition of grammar and vocabulary, they also start to

understand the cultural element belonging to the context in which the English language is used.

Thus, we no longer speak about a general Standard English, but rather of an English language that is based on the local needs. We may say we witness here a reversed phenomenon in which the native background of the English speaking world no longer imposes any rules or codes, but it is the other way round, in the sense that the local community in which English is used as a medium of communication will influence the way in which speakers will get along. We no longer speak about the way in which we use the language, but about some other norms (that are culturally situated. Paradoxically enough they are no longer situated in the context of the English speaking environment. Therefore we no longer require from international students (in non-native English speaking countries), a level of proficiency. Non-native speakers have identified some codes, that are generally accepted, and which make communication easier. One may say therefore that ELF may be a more artificial language meant to help non-native speakers survive: "To sum up so far, empirical ELF research has demonstrated that ELF involves both the frequent, systematic use of certain forms that are not found in native English, and that its speakers employ a range of pragmatic on-line processes in determining which forms to use in any given interaction (Jenkins 2017). In her study entitled **Common ground and different realities: world Englishes and English as a lingua franca**, Barbara Seidlhofer gives an answer to the problem of using codes: "Codification is recognized as a crucial requirement… in terms of actual descriptions of certain observed regularities […] ELF users exploit the potential of the language, they are fully involved in the interactions whether for work or play. They are focused on the purposes of talk and on their interlocutors as people… absorbed in the ad hoc situated negotiation of meaning (which is) a far cry from calling up elements of a foreign language as they were learnt at school and passing them into service as 'correctly' as possible" (Seidlhofer 2009). Jennifer Jenkins also discusses in her paper the prominent features of ELF which basically refers to a simplification of the English language: regularization of irregular forms of verbs (*teached* for *taught*, *losed* for *lost*), prepositions missing (*we are dealing what is science*) (Jenkins 2011). Thus we can speak about an ELF specificity: "A lingua franca is a specific kind of language contact; lingua franca are vehicular languages, contact languages used when speakers do not share a first language […]. While lingua francas are kinds of contact languages, at the same time they are also sites of language contact because speakers' first and other languages are present as an influence, and often also drawn on as situational needs arise" (Jenkins 2011).

To conclude, we have to say that not even in the latter situation described, with English as a medium of instruction, we cannot say that the mere communication between participants is culture free. The very idea of using *foreign* languages to communicate implies the idea of information exchange between participants that do not share the language and the cultural background. Also, this does not mean that these conversations will not carry with them cultural elements. On the contrary, we believe that such users of the English language, in lingua franca contexts, would be required to have some additional skills, besides the linguistic ones. According to G. M. Willems, they would be the so-called socio-cultural that suit the context of communication: "When communicating with a lingua franca, at least three cultures are involved in the interaction: the culture of each interlocutor and the culture of the lingua franca" (Willems 1996). Indeed, when these speakers use the English language, "they use Standard English to fit the frames of their own culture and to express their own identity – the language each of us speaks reflects one's own individual background, the community that one belongs to, and the identity that one wants to convey. As English is assimilated by people of the world, their cultural diversity is re-expressed through the common language" (Munsch 2014). Thus it is hard to anticipate how foreign languages are going to be taught in the future,

but for the time being, we still perceive the element of culture as an important factor that influences both the way of coding our messages and the way in which we decode them. Depending upon each context, foreign language teachers should inquire about their students' needs in terms of using the foreign languages they learn and, based on that, they should decide how much to focus on the idea of teaching culture along with the language. For the time being, we believe that culture is still an important part of the foreign language teaching.

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