Abstract
This paper deals with some aspects of the cultural context of the target language in foreign language learning and assessment with special reference to young learners. It is widely accepted learning a foreign language automatically means learning a second culture. Young learners’ attitudes towards the target language and culture play an important role in foreign learning and an effort should be made to develop positive attitudes with young learners. Parents’ assistance in the formation of positive attitudes towards the target language culture and in foreign language learning, in general, is crucial and therefore parents should become aware of this role. Furthermore, the paper discusses why some people may have negative attitudes towards foreign languages and cultures and an effort is made to explain that the alarming belief that foreign language learning will lead to the erosion of the national identity is to a large extent unjustified. Finally, the need for closer cooperation and mutual trust among all stakeholders is stressed.

1 Introduction

It is widely accepted that language teaching and learning are subject to a large numbers of factors such as linguistic, cognitive, affective and socio-cultural. The importance of the socio-cultural dimension for language teaching and learning is paramount. After all, why do people engage in foreign language learning? Whatever, the initial impetus for doing so, be it the enhancement of job prospects through certificates produced by exams or mere intellectual curiosity, the ultimate reason for teaching and learning a foreign language is to facilitate contact and communication among people of different linguistic and cultural backgrounds. As Stern states “society and culture are, after all, the concepts that represent people with whom the learner eventually must make contact if language learning is to have any value in human terms” (1983:283-4). Therefore, knowledge about the cultures and societies where the target language is spoken should be part of foreign language teaching and
without it second/foreign language learning/acquisition will never be complete. However, sometimes attitudes towards the target language and culture can have a negative effect on the learning process. Moreover, such negative attitudes are strengthened by the unfounded fear that second language learning may threaten the identity of the learner. Language attitudes are the opinions and views language learners hold towards the target language, the speakers of this language and consequently the societies and cultures where this language is spoken as a native language.

In this paper I will focus on the socio-cultural aspect of language learning and discuss in length the relevance of attitudes towards the target language and culture to the teaching and assessment of young learners as well as the role parents can play in this issue.

2 Language learning and culture

The role of teaching and learning culture in a second language has been widely acknowledged (Seyle, 1984; Buttjes and Byram, 1991; Kramsch, 1993, - for role of culture in teaching young learners see Kubanek-German, 2000). The need for a cultural component in language teaching and learning has been established as part of the communicative competence model (Canale and Swain, 1980, Bachman, 1990) since it is found explicitly or implicitly in all the proposed components of the model. Some words, which are part of the semantics sub-component of grammatical competence are, for example, specific to given cultures. It is also well known that rhetorical organization which is part of textual competence varies from culture to culture (see Connor and Kaplan, 1987). The various functions of language, which are under pragmatic competence in the Bachman model, are carried out differently in different cultures (see Kasper and Blum-Kulka, 1993 among others). Finally, the understanding and using of cultural references is a separate category listed under sociolinguistic knowledge.

With regard to the teaching of EFL one could ask; what should the target culture of EFL learners be? Since English is spoken as a native language in, among other places, the UK, USA, Canada, Australia, New Zealand and South Africa it would be
natural to accept as target culture the cultures of the above-mentioned speech communities. Depending on the context one can focus on anyone of those cultures. For example most European nations would decide to concentrate on British culture, South American nations would probably favour USA culture and Asian and Pacific nations would opt either for Australian or American cultures. However, there are reasons to consider these cultures as being not so different. First of all, one should simply think of the origins of all English-speaking countries and their relationship to the UK. They were all former UK colonies and therefore their contemporary culture reflects to a large extent the UK culture from which they developed. Moreover, the cultures of the English-speaking countries have linguistic elements from most cultures of the world because these countries have traditionally attracted immigrants from every corner of the globe who have been enriching the local cultures with elements of their own cultures. One should also not forget that English is very much associated with globalisation and global culture.

One could also argue that since English is learned for instrumental reasons, i.e. to serve as a lingua franca, its learning proceeds independently of the learning of a specific culture. However, this is not the case since the culture of the English-speaking world resides, to a large extent, in the language itself and especially in the idioms of the language.

Two further issues arise in this context. The first concerns the nature of the cultural component in the language lesson or, in other words, how culture should be taught and the second focuses on the impact the local culture should have on teaching methodology and assessment.

With regard to the first issue it is widely accepted that the teaching of culture should be skilfully incorporated and integrated in the lesson since there is no extra time to be devoted to an independent cultural component in the lesson. As for teaching young learners the aspects of culture to be presented in the lesson should be representative of the culture of the corresponding native group i.e. everyday life of English-speaking children. This actually makes things easier since there are a lot of similarities between the cultures of young children around the world, which evolve around the constant discovery of the world around them. Also there are many activities that children are universally preoccupied with such as toys, games, arts and crafts, etc.
Moreover, the methodology of teaching and assessing should also be modified according to the local culture. In the first place, socio-economic factors of a given culture should be taken into account. Less wealthy nations or regions may not be able to afford the materials, books, equipment, and staff requirements that a given methodology prescribes and therefore, adjustments are necessary.

Secondly, those topics considered taboo or very sensitive in a given culture should not be broached in teaching or assessment materials. A similar problem arises with regard to the relationship of the two sexes. Some settings are not in favour of co-educational groups. Moreover, the ways and when a person should display their knowledge varies across cultures. Some cultures favour voluntary initiative in displaying knowledge something that could be considered rude in other cultures, in which humility is promoted and exhibition of knowledge should come after direct request from a regulating authority.

Moreover, large numbers of students in a class may not allow enough practice in speaking, as, for example, a communicative competence methodology would support, and consequently this skill should not appear prominently in an assessment battery. Alternative ways should be sought in order to circumvent such problems. In the case of speaking activities group work may be a way of having many students practicing speaking at the same time.

Another issue that needs to be broached is the role of mother tongue in the foreign language lesson. In my opinion, there are cases in which its use not only is appropriate but it is also deemed necessary since its use enhances learning and maximizes the amount of learning without compromising its quality (see Auerbach, 1993; Atkinson, 1987). I do not think however, that a recipe should be offered in order for practitioners to follow. Teachers should analyse their own situations, take into account cultural expectations, and decide about the appropriate amount of native speech to use. For example, the inclusion of a glossary with the Greek translation of the vocabulary encountered in the passages found in many textbooks produced for the Greek market is not a bad idea as such; what counts is how teachers and students use it.
3 Language attitudes

Consequently, there is no doubt that the teaching of culture is an absolutely necessary component of language teaching. Seyle (1984) lists seven skills that need to be developed in the learner as part of culture teaching goals. The last one relates to attitudes toward other societies whereby, according to Seyle (1984:7), “the student should demonstrate intellectual curiosity about the target culture and empathy towards its people”. When learners develop this kind of curiosity it is believed that their second language learning will be enhanced. A number of studies have pointed in this direction. For example, studies with Anglophone students of French in Montreal (Gardner and Lambert, 1959; Gardner, 1979) showed that attitudes had an important, though indirect, effect on learning French. Van Els et al. (1984), also working in the Canadian setting, found that positive attitudes towards the target language were associated with successful second language learning. Similarly, Scherer and Wertheimer (1964) report that American college students, who had positive attitudes towards German achieved greater proficiency in German.

4 The role of parents in language attitude formation

When it comes to young learners one could claim, however, that the role of attitudes towards the target language may not play a significant role since children have not developed such attitudes yet (see Macnamara, 1973). The assumption that young learners have not developed their own language attitudes may well be accurate. However, this assumption does not necessarily mean that young learners have no attitude towards the target language at all. It is very often the case that young learners adopt uncritically their parents’ language attitudes. This has been shown in a number of studies focusing on the role of parents in the development of language attitudes towards the target language and target language speech community. For example, Gardner (1960) showed that the attitudes of Anglophone Canadian students learning French reflected their parents’ attitudes towards French Canadians. Along the same lines Feenstra (1969) confirmed the above findings about Anglophone learners of
French in Canada. Moreover, the study showed that these attitudes have an effect on the students’ progress in learning French. Similar findings are reported in Stern (1967) whose study showed that parents’ positive attitudes towards the Welsh language affected positively their children’s success in schools where the language of instruction was Welsh. It becomes clear that parents are one of the main agents (and may be the most important) who can instil positive attitudes towards foreign languages and cultures. This presupposes two things: a) that parents have or are willing to develop positive attitudes towards the target language and culture and b) that they are willing to transmit these positive attitudes to their children through their involvement in their children’s language learning and assessment.

In general, we can say that people maintain positive language attitudes towards English and the English-speaking countries. A majority of nations and individuals recognises the role of English as an international “lingua franca” and the importance of being able to communicate in English. At the same time, political events may periodically give rise to anti-English language sentiments. Such factors and events could include the colonial past of the UK and current US foreign policy.

One could wonder here whether socio-economic factors can outweigh socio-political ones and if this is the case to what extent. Some believe that this is indeed the case especially with reference to language and advertising. For Morley and Robins (1995) the identities displayed in and offered to TV audiences are no longer political ones based on citizenship in a national community, but rather economic ones based on participation in a global consumer market (in Piller, 2001:155.) Along the same lines and drawing on the works of Ewen (1976), Williams (1980) and Marchand (1985), Piller (2001) asserts that in the first part of the 20th century “advertising contributed to the configuration of national unified cultures organized around commodity consumption.” In contrast with what happened a mere half century ago, Piller states that “in many societies we can observe a shift from political identities based on citizenship to economic ones based on participation in a global consumer market” (153). This shift brings with it a shift from monolingual practices in advertising to multilingual and English-dominant ones as shown in Piller’s study. This shift, which extends beyond advertising, is, most probably, associated with a shift in attitudes towards the English-speaking world.

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A further issue that currently can create some distrust towards English is its association with globalization (Phillipson, R. and Skutnabb-Kangas T., 1999). Some believe that the development of English will be at the expense of other languages and cultures. While I will not discuss this issue at length, I would like to mention two things. First, in some places English may be expanding but it does not necessarily constitute a threat. Papapavlou (1997, 2001) in a series studies on the role of English in Cyprus found that the fears of English threatening the Greek language on the island and the local culture are basically unfounded. Also, Davy and Pavlou (2001) explain that some countries chose to capitalise on existing standards of English, using it as a ‘window on the world’, with emphasis on English as a school subject but without other official internal functions and therefore maintaining the integrity of the local national language. Similarly, in some countries such as Cyprus we are witnessing an expansion of English but its status has diminished. Similar phenomena are found in many European countries. English has become a very useful tool but it is not a status symbol any longer (at least compared to the status English enjoyed just a few years ago). For example, in Cyprus only members of the privileged social classes could afford to learn English either through public and private education or private tuition in the past. Even though public education has never been prohibitively expensive most parents could not afford to send their children to secondary education where they could learn or improve English. At that time, people who had a secondary education degree and spoke English were considered to be highly educated and were admired. Nowadays, provision of language teaching in English is not such a rare commodity and almost everybody learns English. Therefore, knowing English is a necessary qualification not a special or prestigious skill.

Second, with regard to the impact of foreign language learning on national identity, I believe that becoming a non-native speaker of English will not lead to the “erosion” or loss of a learner’s identity. Some may fear that learning English will interfere with the child’s formation of social identity (Riley, 1990:281) and to the detriment of the local identity, such that parents and other groups are against learning any foreign language at a very young age. This could happen when there is a disparity between the value of the two languages in a bilingual setting but not necessarily in an EFL setting. This fear may be due to the belief that becoming bilingual automatically leads to becoming bi-cultural. I personally disagree with this view and think the
misunderstanding and some of the concomitant fear can be attributed to the terminology adopted. I don’t think we can talk about second culture acquisition with the ease we talk about second language acquisition. I would suggest that what happens when you learn a foreign language, with regard to culture, is the following. During the learning process you become familiar with certain aspects of the target language culture, which you can juxtapose, consciously or subconsciously, with the values of your culture and evaluate them, on your free will and without any pressure. You may judge on your own that some aspects of the target language culture are positive and you may attempt to assimilate them because you believe they will add something to your personality. In doing so, you may, abandon an aspect of your native culture or simply add to the existing repertoire of cultural values. Or, conversely, you may decide that the aspects of foreign culture you have encountered and evaluated do not appeal to you as a learner and it is simply tolerated. The result of this education process is that foreign language learners can simply enrich their cultural identity with a new dimension. This additional dimension of the learner is an international aspect of his/her identity because this individual now belongs to a greater community, that of English language users. Moreover, we are all international citizens.

I would like to mention that the teacher bears some responsibility for presenting the target culture in a balanced way, neither entirely negative nor utterly positive. This is an important aspect of attitudes and it is mostly up to the teacher to assist with this development in children. At this point it is important to mention that besides attitudes towards the target language and culture children develop attitudes towards the language and the learning of a foreign language.

The above discussion aimed at supporting that English should not be regarded as a threat to local identity and that there are no real reasons for adults to harbour negative attitudes towards it. Adults should therefore avoid transmitting such negative attitudes to young learners since these attitudes may adversely affect their development in English.

5 Parental involvement
The benefits of parental involvement in children’s education have been long acknowledged (see Kellaghan et al. 1993; Wolfendale, 1983, 1989; Macleod, 1989; Wyness, 1996; among others). Blondin et al. (1998) consider this to be one of the societal factors that can influence second/foreign language learning even though as they admit, they “were able to gather only limited evidence on this factor” (1998:38). They present information from two studies in Italy (Lerna & Taeschner, 1993; Spadola and Taeschner, 1991) that report on results of encouraging parental involvement in language learning and various studies in Germany (Andreas, 1996) that show that parents unanimously agree on the usefulness of foreign language learning. Blondin et al. continue their report with the following recommendation.

\textit{In the course of the introduction of a foreign language in the primary school, parental involvement is important. This involvement should rest on helping parents to achieve a clear understanding of the objectives pursued by the school. Involving parents will establish an encouraging, supportive environment outside the classroom in which children may talk about, study and use the foreign language they are learning. It will also give the school an opportunity for discussing with parents and sensitising them in respect of any language-choices that may be available} (1998:38)

Regardless of the fact that Blondin et al. were not able to gather a lot of evidence on the parental involvement in children’s language learning, it is felt that in general parents understand the need to speak foreign languages and do favour the teaching of foreign languages in primary education. However, beyond this positive disposition there is no evidence for a more active engagement with the children’s foreign language learning. This is supported by a recent study on parental involvement in language test choice (Pavlou, 2003) which found that parents rarely ask for information and explanation about the exams language school owners choose for the children to take. This can be interpreted both as a result of the trust they show to their teachers but also as lack of interest.
6 Implications for language teaching and assessment

In this paper I tried to show how language attitudes can influence language learning and how the parents’ role is instrumental in this respect since children do not develop their own language attitudes independently at this age. Moreover, we have also seen that even though parental involvement is considered very important in children’s education there is little empirical evidence on parental involvement in foreign language learning. These two broad findings call for action on many fronts.

First of all, parents should be helped be develop positive attitudes towards foreign languages and cultures and foreign language learning. Through seminars and other ways parents should be informed that learning a foreign language will not have a negative impact on the child’s identity. On the contrary, it will help the child become more cosmopolitan, open-minded and tolerant. Some responsibility falls on the shoulders of the foreign language teaching industry. They have the obligation to promote their relation to language learners as equal partners and not reduce it to a businessman-client relationship. Again this can be achieved in a number of ways. Those involved in the language teaching industry must make every effort to show that their main interest is how children will learn best and not how they will maximize their profits. They should include parents in the language learning process. This will serve two purposes. It will send the message that parental opinion is valuable in this matter and that parents and language teaching professionals are working together towards a common goal, to help the children achieve their full potential as language learners. Parents can also be involved in the assessment of their children’s language skills. They should ask to be presented with all possible assessment methods and in cooperation with the teacher they should evaluate the relative merits of each proposed exam and choose the one that best suits the needs of the child in the specific context (see Pavlou, 2004). Moreover, one of the best known methods of alternative assessment, the portfolio, can only be fully exploited if parents become part of the process (see Ioannou-Georgiou and Pavlou, 2003). Moreover, the parents can be involved in their children’s language learning process by being involved in projects that are assigned to the children and by being asked to respond to the teacher’s
comments on the progress reports children periodically receive. Another very practical and concrete way for the English teaching industry to show that they are really interested in the promotion of English language learning is the establishment of prizes for those non-native speakers that excel (among thousands of test takers) on the exams at various age and competence levels.

Moreover, parents (besides teachers and peers) should assist the development of positive language attitudes in their children. This can be done by raising children’s awareness about other languages and cultures, by avoiding negative characterizations of a given language and culture and by praising foreign languages and cultures when appropriate. Parents could also directly or indirectly raise children’s awareness of the benefits of knowing a foreign language to the extent they can relate to. For example, children can only faintly understand the role of a foreign language as a job qualification but they probably understand better its usefulness when it comes to communicating with other children around the world.

In some countries foreign languages are relegated to second class citizens in the curriculum. In a survey of testing practices of primary EFL teachers it was shown that one of the reasons that the teachers opt for testing English is to send a message to the students that English is as important as math and history (Pavlou and Ioannou-Georgiou, 2004). Therefore, in order to enhance the status of foreign languages in the primary level, and at the same time, the status of the primary (foreign language) teacher (see Cameron, 2001) foreign language learning at the primary level should be assessed in a rigorous, systematic and pedagogically sound way. The introduction of new assessment schemes often meets with resistance or disapproval by the parents for various reasons. In order to avoid such a reaction parents should be involved in all stages of this process from its conception to its implementation and the evaluation of the first outcomes. Parents would be more eager to see the merits and accept such a scheme if the proposed assessment process fulfills certain requirements such as: a) it will convincingly have a positive impact on the children’s learning through its formative nature and the positive washback effect, b) it should not exert pressure on the children c) it should not be competitive d) it should not pose a significant financial burden on the parents. It is expected that parents are not assessment experts and may not be in command of the target language either and therefore some may claim that
their involvement as described above can be difficult or even prove problematic. However, I believe that parents and those genuinely interested, can easily grasp the main issues at stake once presented to them. For example, a parent will most probably understand that including a speaking component in an exam will help in the development of such a skill. Likewise a parent may be convinced that fluency (or some communicative ability) may be preferred over accuracy at a certain level. Similarly, parents will certainly understand that attitude development goals in an exam are useful and worthwhile in the long run.

Especially with reference to language attitudes Ioannou-Georgiou and Pavlou support that the best time to foster positive attitudes is when language learners are young since “negative attitudes formed at this stage are hard to change in the future” (2003:8).

Moreover, the same authors go even further to suggest that attitudes should be one of the four learning related areas that should be assessed with young learners. The four suggested areas are skills development (listening, speaking, reading, writing and the integration of these four skills), learning how to learn skills, attitudes and behavioural and social skills. Ioannou-Georgiou and Pavlou (2003: 6-8) stress that the assessment of attitudes should be carried out in order to foster positive attitudes towards the learning and the target language and culture only and not to give a grade to the learner. The early stages of foreign language learning are undoubtedly the best time to form such positive attitudes. It is understood here that the role of teachers in the formation of attitudes is of paramount importance.

7 Recommendations for research

The above discussion has raised a series of questions, which should be investigated through research. The first area that needs to be researched regards the role of parents’ attitudes in children’s foreign language learning especially in EFL settings. Research in this area is both scarce and dated. It would be interesting to know whether parents’ knowledge of the target language and culture has any influence in the child’s achievement in foreign language learning. Then, we need more information on whether children’s positive attitudes towards foreign languages and cultures and towards foreign language learning influence in a positive way children’s overall achievement in the foreign language. In other words, we need more
information on the relationship between language attitudes and language proficiency especially for the young learners group.

Information on parents’ expectation from such exams and the interpretation of the results is also something that would improve language assessment and learning. What do the results of such exams mean to the parents? Do they think that a good grade in a certificate is equivalent to ability to study in a foreign country? Do they consider a certificate to be a job qualification? In other words parents should be informed about the predictive validity and the market value of the certificates their children obtain from such exams. Parents can be informed about this only through interaction with the rest of the stakeholders such as test producers and employers. Exam producers should inform parents what exactly their certificate represents in the long run. It should be made clear for example that this certificate testifies the ability of the holder to communicate effectively in writing (and not in speaking) in English. Similarly, the certificate from another exam which is more grammatically and reading based testifies that the holder is in command of English grammar and can read effectively a range of texts in English. All these can be achieved through closer cooperation among the numerous stakeholders in language assessment (such as children, parents, teachers language teaching professional, educational authorities etc.). It is hoped that such cooperation will be fruitful and it will just slow down current assessment procedures without any real benefits?

Another burning issue is the validity of continuous and alternative assessment. The advantages of alternative assessment are well known but there are some disadvantages with regard to their validity and practicality. It would be very useful to find out whether the predictive validity of alternative assessment in terms of progress in language learning is strong.

Another challenging aspect of assessment for all age groups is how we deal with and reward partial knowledge or linguistic behaviour, which indicate progress and growth. As mentioned earlier enhancing motivation should be one of the main aims of teaching young learners and because of the often detrimental effect of exam results on learners’ motivation on continuing with their language learning, rewarding partial knowledge and relative progress could have a positive effect on learners’ learning. Finally, what I consider to be the most important issue at this time is the extent to which standardised testing and alternative assessment complement each other. Since