

# Culture-free and Culture-bound English Language Classes

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## Abstract

The popular belief persists that English language teaching should be embedded with cultural conventions. This trend insists that language is infused with culture and should be learned and taught simultaneously. This line of thought encourages and prefers teaching small c (habits, customs, and everyday behaviors) than big C (history, geography, and literature). In fact, this type of English language teaching is culture-bound and tries to familiarize the learners with the norms and standards of native English speakers. At the other end of the continuum lies the culture-free English language teaching. According to this belief English language no more belongs to native speakers of English. That is, English language is learned and taught for utilitarian purposes such as getting a job, passing an exam, communicating with other non-native speakers and so on. Here the role of culture in the classroom is almost neutral. However, this paper takes a middle position and argues that the crucial issue to consider is the purpose and goal of learning English language. That is, it is the objectives of the program and learners which determines whether or not cultural aspects of English language to be introduced.

## 1. Introduction

The importance of culture cannot be denied in any English language teaching (ELT) context. However, there are a lot of factors involved in this process that should be tackled before embarking on any course of action. Indeed the boundary between the small c and big C becomes fuzzy in ELT classrooms. In the following sections the various aspects and relationship between language and culture will be delineated.

## 2. English as a Global Language

Clearly, the English language is the means of communication among different cultures. Technically speaking, it is a *lingua franca* across different nations. It is argued that *globalization* has been speeded up through English and the Internet (Harumi 2002). Arguably, the English language has acquired a new cultural role in this process. Therefore, it can be proved that English is the common property of the people who use it to fulfill their personal goals. Kachru (1985: 67) rightly asserts that “it only marginally carries the British and American way of life.” Consequently, the English language

belongs to the whole world and not to some specific countries. This is the process which has been labeled as the *deanglicisation* of the English language.

Thus, the questions that arise are: Whose culture should be taught? What type of culture should be taught? How should it be taught? In this regard, Brown (2000: 182) remarks that culture learning “is experiential, a process that continues over years ...” However, it is claimed that “culture is the heart of ESL teaching” (Rowsell, et al. 2007: 142). It has been further stated that learning a second language cannot be divorced from its culture. Also, in order to learn a language one has to have some awareness about its people and their culture. The fact is that there are huge discrepancies between people and cultures. These differences of views and perceptions are realized in people’s language.

Nevertheless, the premise that language and culture are inextricably linked has been challenged by the spread of English as a global language. It is because many people want to learn English not to travel or interact with native speakers of English. Therefore, these people do not have to learn the British or American culture. They learn English for various reasons: to obtain a job, to be promoted in their job, to access scientific information, to enter a good university, to do business with other non-natives, and so on. As Nault (2006: 324) notes “the globalization of English complicates the issue of how to teach culture ...”

### **3. Contextual Shaping**

It is an undeniable fact that language learning is not solely governed by linguistic components. As Rowsell, et al. (2007: 153) affirm “it is a complex process of identity formation ...” The second language culture might affect the learner’s perception, values, attitudes and behavior (Gaston 1992). However, this situation is true in an ESL context where language and culture are very closely connected. That is, the direct contact between culture and social norms enhance language learning and teaching. Nevertheless, in an EFL situation where the foreign language is taught and learned in the learners’ home culture it is different. Thus, as Brown (2000: 177) confirms “Misunderstandings are therefore likely to occur between members of different cultures.”

In non- English speaking contexts, the role of teacher and learners and classroom activities usually vary across cultures. Clearly, these diverse perceptions may not always be easily reconciled (Byram & Risager 1999). The crux of the matter is that with the globalization of English and use of Internet and TV programs, the concept of culture is undergoing a huge change. Mainly, most of the English language teaching (ELT) occurs in EFL contexts. At this juncture, English language teaching must be implemented based on the learners’ needs where they want to achieve various personal wants (Kramsch

1994). In this process, the learners can gradually observe and analyze the differences between the home and target culture and thus shape a linguistic and cultural context.

#### **4. Cultural Competence**

In order to function appropriately, the learners need to acquire linguistic, communicative and cultural competence. As it was pointed out in the previous section, the learners are somehow able to achieve linguistic competence in the EFL situations where they have hardly any adequate and appropriate exposure to the target culture. However, in the ESL situations learners can directly experience the target culture. Therefore, the EFL learners need to be made aware of cultural conventions and social norms of the target language in one way or another.

Mainly, with the spread of English as an international language the EFL learners need to gain multicultural competence. They need to be competent both in their own culture and other cultures: cross-cultural competence. However, “cross-cultural competence ... is predicated on paradox and conflict ...” (Kramsch 1994: 240). In this regard, Nault (2006) wisely remarks that the world of English is rather complicated. That is, the world of English speaking countries is not monolithic rather they have a myriad of sub-cultures within themselves. In fact, the world of English is diverse and is in constant flux. Thus, Byram and Risager (1999) suggest that English language teaching had better produce multicultural learners as far as possible. The learners should be provided with enough opportunities inside and outside the classroom to experience other viewpoints and consequently reflect on their own culture: intercultural competence. Thus, learners can acquire the ability to communicate with different ethnic groups and develop “intercultural communicative competence” (Alvarez, 2007: 127).

#### **5. Goals of Learning and Teaching**

The main issue that should be considered is the learners’ purpose of learning language. Tsou (2005: 40) states that although the importance of cultural competence has been emphasized, “the specific contents and techniques about culture teaching ... remain unclear.” Alvarez (2007: 135) also notes that “there is no single shared paradigm for foreign language education.” The problem is that in most situations, institutions impose their own goals and values. Thus, learners and their goals of learning are ignored and usually methods and materials are determined by the given institutions. First of all, we should clarify whose culture we intend to present to our learners: target culture, home culture or international culture. As Dogancay-Aktuna (2006: 283) contends “in many EFL contexts the goals of language teaching and norms of classroom participation differ from those in ESL contexts.” It is true that in ESL contexts the learners can rather easily

acculturate, i.e. adapt to a new culture. However, in EFL contexts this transition is arduous and sometimes unachievable.

## **6. Home and International Culture through English**

Teaching and learning target culture in the EFL contexts is conceivably strenuous. Kramsch (1994) argues that meaning emerges via face-to-face encounters. Therefore, it is difficult to teach and learn rigid target cultural facts in the classroom. Harumi (2002: 51) also points out that the amount of knowledge to be obtained about the target culture in the EFL classroom is limited because “the time available to them is already limited.” Meanwhile, Nault (2006) asserts that many EFL learners communicate in English with non-natives. Therefore, they do not need to have American or British cultural knowledge to do so.

In the main, Brown (2000) suggests that learners can make use of their prior knowledge in order to acquire language and culture. One important strategy that can be used in order to learn English language rather easily “is to shift the focus to local cultures” (Nault 2006: 322). In this way, the learners can read and produce texts in English about their country and local culture which they have mastery over them. This activity can put the learners at ease and they can feel relaxed to study and discuss familiar topics. Also, in order to familiarize the learners with the international culture thorough the English language, we can present and use topics such as pollution, deforestation, population explosion, global warming, and so on. Certainly, interesting and familiar topics can enhance language acquisition and speed up cross-cultural knowledge.

## **7. Materials**

Certainly, choosing appropriate materials is not a simple task. The crucial issue to consider is how the selected materials deal with cultural conventions and norms. Admittedly, most of the English materials are not value-free or neutral. This culture-bound nature of materials creates problems for the EFL students. That is, many of the learners encounter not only problems in dealing with unfamiliar topics but also with linguistic ones. This double burden creates difficulties in comprehension and production of language. Therefore, using real-life and authentic cultural materials are hardly appropriate in EFL contexts. In fact, it is hard for the learners to view the world from another perspective (Kramsch 1994).

Tsou (2005) maintains that before selecting any materials, the teachers should ensure that the learners have enough background knowledge about them. At this juncture, Nault (2006) suggests that teachers can use the Internet to find appropriate materials to

use in the classroom. Mainly, the experience of teaching and learning of English indicates that employing in-house produced materials about the learners' own country and social and cultural norms creates a meaningful context and consequently enhance language acquisition. Nevertheless, Cultural-loaded English language materials can be taught and learned along with their cultural aspects in ESL contexts. However, in EFL situations this approach is untenable because of the lack of time, enormity of cultural issues, teachers' lack of familiarity with the target culture, difficulty of cultural topics, differences of cultures and so on.

## **8. Learners**

Commonly, the EFL learners have to construct their familiar meanings with unfamiliar foreign linguistic devices. Thus, they have to be competent both in the language and its rules of use. Furthermore, it is necessary that the learners have an overall awareness of the norms and conventions of the target culture. Arguably, the more proficient the learners become, the better they can learn about the target language culture.

In the main, classroom learning behaviors differ cross-culturally (Dogancay-Aktuna 2006) and textbooks designed for ESL learners could hardly be useful to EFL learners. Even within the same EFL classroom "language learners are not always sharing the same cultural context" (Rowell, et al. 2007: 148). For instance, in a typical EFL classroom, each of the students usually come from different backgrounds and has their own particular purpose of studying language. They may be interested in learning the language in order to enter a high-ranking university and they may not have any desire of cross-cultural communication. Notably, Fiorito (2000: 31) cautions that "A couple of years of language instruction with some literature-based courses are not enough to prepare our students for a competitive global market-place."

Remarkably, what our students need is to construct both linguistic and cultural meaning for themselves. Thus, when the learners gained enough competence in the language, they could learn to see the world from a different perspective. It is, therefore, suggested that learning of English implemented through in-house produced materials which are related to the learners' home culture and contain familiar topics within familiar contexts. "In this case a shy student becomes more outgoing upon encountering an event in class with which she could identify" (Rowell, et al. 2007: 148). In this way, the learners can be directed towards understanding their own culture. Thus, after gaining adequate competence in the language, they can be initiated into seeing and appraising the foreign culture. This is what Byram (1989: 14) calls "a bilingual vision."

## **9. Teachers**

Teaching cultural points is a dilemma for many ELT teachers because culture is variable, different and contentious. By teaching culture, the teachers can encourage the sense of openness in the learners (Byram & Risager 1999). On the one hand, teachers have to find appropriate ways of teaching culture, and, on the other hand, to find the ways of dealing with their institution and society which impose their own cultural values (Kramsch 1994). Also, teachers are usually, under constant pressure to cover materials and hardly save any time to deal with cultural issues. Dogancay-Aktuna (2006) argues that there are a lot of sources which deal with culture. However, she questions their usefulness because of the differences of teaching contexts.

The problem is that there is no training for teachers on how to deal with cultural issues. Meanwhile, when the teachers do not deal appropriately with the cultural points, the learners consider them “lazy or incompetent” (ibid: 283). Therefore, it is necessary that teachers be trained and supported by their institutions and societies. It is not meant that language teachers be trained to teach culture per se. “Rather, these teachers bring alternative ways of knowing that can provide greater points of access for students in developing broader worldviews” (Dei, et al. 2000: 264). On the whole, it is expected that teachers raise learners’ awareness and provide them with some general information about the diversity of the cultures. Teachers cannot prepare lists of cultural issues and impart them to the learners, because this may lead to stereotyping. It is suggested that in order to boost the teachers’ skills in dealing with the cross-cultural issues, they might be engaged in some action research. These small-scale ethnographic research projects could arouse teachers’ interest in their profession.

## **10. Conclusion**

Some programs offer courses in intercultural communication, sociolinguistics or language and culture. However, such courses deal mostly with theoretical issues in the field and hardly involve themselves with real-life issues and do not have any practical applicability. Also, the cultural issues taught in the classrooms are rather superficial and hardly lead to any critical reflection (Ivers 2007). Therefore, Nault (2006) notes that teaching culture should be reconsidered in the light of the globalization of the English language. Also, teaching culture and language should meet the learners’ diverse needs. It might be suggested that there should be a global approach to teaching culture with some consideration of local needs and circumstances.

In the main, the English language courses should be designed based on international and multicultural trends. These courses should expose learners to different

varieties of English. More importantly, the number of hours for teaching English should be increased. Both learners and teachers should have more contacts in English with other people. Finally, since many of the students and teachers do not have the opportunity to visit English-speaking countries, they can watch different types of films. Watching movies is one of the practical ways of learning both language and culture.

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