

# Why is culture an important issue for language teaching and language learning?

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Keywords: culture, classroom interaction styles, language lesson, cultural values, pragmatic, competence

## 1. Introduction

A generally accepted definition of culture is ‘the beliefs, values and interactive practices of a group, derived from society over time. It is the set of rules that a society uses to produce behavior that is meaningful and appropriate for that society’ (Rieschild, 2001:22). As language is possibly the most dominant form of expressing behavior within a group, culture should play an important role in the language teaching and learning process.

There are many aspects of culture, which are relevant to language learning. I will attempt to address the major issues under four general headings, those being: classroom interaction styles, culturally relevant teaching resources, aspects of language retention and culture specific aspects of the teacher and student role. The definition of learning I have chosen is ‘the way a person abstracts information from the environment, remembers it, classifies it into concepts and categories, designs goals by using it in problem-solving, and creates new knowledge’ (Mestenhauser, 1981:117 in Damen, 1987:300). From this definition, there are both internal and external factors for the student. Internal factors such as the learner’s concepts of the world and cognitive processes; and external factors such as the socio-political climate of the environment surrounding the area of learning and different approaches of the teacher (or teachers) delivering the curriculum.

Language teaching and learning provide more complex considerations, due to the situation of learners or teachers coming from different cultures. These issues will be discussed in the main part of the essay, with the implications for both learners and teachers. There are a lot of fields of language learning, but the focus will be on the field of teaching English conversation.

## 2. Classroom interaction styles

The group dynamic can be a difficult factor, especially in cross-cultural situations. Aspects of the language learner’s behavior may seem unaccountable to the teacher who may draw conclusions based on their own values of how to behave in the classroom. Power relations are often invisible in the language classroom, as students do not introduce their status and socio-economic rank to the teacher or other students. For example, some students may come from elite backgrounds, with private education or having graduated from an elite public school. Such issues are rarely discussed upon arrival to university. However, this may be evident to other students who have interacted with each other in class and throughout the course. Some learners can feel intimidated; interacting, especially in pair work, with someone who holds a higher societal rank. Even more, to do this may go against the societal norms of that culture. This mode of behavior is in contrast to the language instructor, who has the general aim to provide conditions of equality and promote equal talk-time.

In the context of university, many students have had limited exposure to speaking English as a

majority of their English study in High school focussed on sentence-level grammar and translation. The emphasis on not making mistakes is also another cultural factor which limits verbal output. With written output, many learners tend to use an eraser for all mistakes. Obviously, spoken English is very different to written English in structure, grammar and lexical density, for example, so perceived errors cannot be changed without being uttered first. As Mestenhauser illustrates: 'to make a mistake is painful; to guess is to admit to not having spent enough time in finding the correct answer' (ibid.) The learners are not just dealing with new lexical input, but a whole new approach to language learning, which is in contrast to their previous experiences before entering university.

So, despite the teacher and language institutions' perceptions and values in the classroom environment, students may not necessarily adopt a new system of register and power relations just because of the different physical environment. In the university context, a student taking several different lessons in a day could change register multiple times. An example of this could be a student having a mandatory morning class with a senior professor; then an English conversation class, where the teacher is addresses on first name terms, followed by an elective subject, where the students are expected to work together for presentations but still maintain a clear social distance with the professor. This is a very complex process involving change of language use, gesture, learning styles and levels of attention. Therefore, sensitivity to student dynamics needs to be considered.

Socio-historical studies in language have also illustrated the point that 'different social structuring of activities across social groups at particular historical moments will differentially impact the development of certain higher mental functions (e.g. abstract thinking)' (Ochs, 1998:15). This may be more important in the context of overseas students in university who may have different learning styles, perceptions of language learning and social rules in the classroom.

Setting tasks which involve abstract thinking can be problematic for a group to interact and promote an ideal learning environment. What may be considered usual to a British instructor may be perceived as abstract to the non-native English learner. One example of this is regular group activity work, where a table of students share the work and receive the same grade. This could be another barrier to inhibit interaction.

The speed of talk can also have adverse effects upon the group dynamic. As Scollon and Scollon (1983:156–188) point out, faster speaker can hear a slower speaker as reserved, withdrawn, lacking opinions or even possibly hostile and the slower speaker perceives the faster one negatively. This can be helped by making such differences explicit, both for teachers and learners in the classroom. The implications of what cultural perceptions the student brings into the foreign language classroom can have far reaching consequences. The above authors argue that speaking style reflects underlying assumptions about the relations of distance and power between the participants (ibid.). The language teaching resources play an important role here, but that will be discussed in the next part.

Another element of the learner's background influencing interaction is the level of formal education. This can, and is also usually linked with social class. The more educated the learner, the higher the chances are of grasping more concepts and achieving a higher level of comprehension. This, in turn, increases ability in applying such concepts in the language learning and applying situation. Certain aids may not be utilized by some students, and according to Linda Achren, 'these skills are not universal givens but are actually learned through formal education' (1992:26). This quote highlights the importance of teacher awareness in assessing learner needs and problems.

Within a learner's background, fundamental beliefs and concepts are heavily influential in language learning. This is evident in Japan, where core values are based on different assumptions to British, and Western values in general, upon which understanding is based. The English language and its related thought patterns have evolved from the Anglo-European cultural pattern. According to Kaplan (1966:3) 'English is essentially a Platonic-Aristotelian sequence, descended from the philosophers of ancient Greece and shaped subsequently by Roman, Medieval European, and later Western thinkers. It is not a better nor worse system than any other, but different'. The confrontation of beliefs and concepts can occur at the teacher / learner level. As most Japanese students perceive the teacher to hold a respected role in society, situations where a misunderstanding exists may pass unnoticed.

Different cultures may also have different attitudes towards concepts. For example, these attitudes may be influenced by religion or a lack of knowledge of the appropriate register. A study in cross-cultural communication difficulties in the medical profession found that non-native speakers used inappropriate word choice. Pauwels (1990:105) detailed an example of a lady who kept referring to her child as 'baby', despite the child being a teenager. However, 'the use of the word 'baby' was no meant to be affectionate but seemed to be the reflection of a different cultural perception of stages of life (life cycles)'. The above does not represent a breakdown on the lexico-semantic level, but on the level of discourse (or sociopragmatic) level. This will be discussed in part three.

Another aspect influencing classroom interaction is room layout. Often, different cultures arrange working and study areas differently. Supporting this, Tavares and Cavalcanti (1996) argue that classroom context is also an example of a cultural group.

The position of the tables can trouble some learners. In the university context, the individual or pair tables are set out in straight lines, facing the white board. Such a pattern is to be maintained, with a plan of exact table formation illustrated in the form of a notice in many classes. It is therefore no surprise that moving tables into small groups causes some trouble for learners. Sitting face to face may be uncomfortable for students who are not familiar with each other. Also, the tables are quite small, which can also restrict learner's personal body space.

However, this is in contrast to another example of workspace layout of American and Japanese office arrangements. The American model tends to employ single cubicles, whilst the Japanese offices are arranged in groups of tables. According to Miller (1994:227) 'The structure of the Japanese workplace will contribute to more communication verbally rather than through memos'. These two examples illustrate the impact of room layout and the implications for more effective language learning. The examples above also illustrate the context specific nature of layout, with different patterns for different social practices.

### **3. Culturally relevant teaching materials**

As most language courses are taught with a planned curriculum the choice of textbook and its cultural relevance will be discussed. Firstly, it is worth mentioning the popularity of English being spoken throughout the world, and especially in South East Asia as a lingua franca. The cultural implications of this are currently in discussion. Since most speakers don't speak to Western native speakers of English, there is an argument that the text book and other teaching resources should not involve Western culture and cultural patterns, but base the material on the region where the language will be used. Wu (1999) claimed that English was not being used by non-native speakers to other non-native speakers, and therefore the English used need not reflect any "Anglo" cultural values.

The use of English as a lingua franca is also important for general conversation. In the university context, the majority of students do not learn English conversation to visit one specific country, but to travel to many countries, including those which do not use English as the native language.

Therefore, the level of culture and type of cultural information needs to be carefully considered. As with previous methods of 'imparting cultural knowledge' in the form of 'high culture' and socio-historical accounts or 'civilization' of a specific culture, this may only be relevant to one individual. As Damen (1987) pointed out, a 'civilization' approach may simply reflect stereotypic conceptions more frequently than ethnographic reality.

With the questionable validity of "Anglo" cultural values in English language education for speakers using English as a lingua franca, the future of 'inner circle' native language teachers has also been raised. Obviously, in the field of spoken English, as with other areas of English language, employment decisions are made on the basis of knowledge and teaching skills in the field, as opposed to ethno-cultural distinctions. However, the issue of using native English speaking educators in countries where English is used as a lingua franca is ongoing.

There are difficulties incorporating culture into the language lesson, as culture is bound contextually, unlike lexico-grammar. Crozet and Liddicoat (1997:5) summarize the problem that 'The most crucial issue for teachers is therefore not so much that culture in language is not easily accessible but that culture is primarily variable'. They also point out, that the format as well as the content of a text may be heavily culturally loaded.

From the perspective of English instructors in Japan, this is important. By limiting cultural content to the British or other 'inner circle' country systems of behavioral norms and discourse, the students are limited in their ability to interact effectively. It is also worth noting the perceptions of students. Many students appear surprised by the fact that English and American culture and that cultural norms are different.

Beal (1990) carried out a study between Native speakers of Australian English and native speakers of French using English in the workplace. She found the breakdown in communication between the two groups was due to different speaking strategies. What appeared rude to the Australian was not seen as rude to the native French person. This in turn created a misunderstanding. One example was tension involving taking other worker's office equipment from his/ her desk; 'One French informant pointed out that 'it's not your pen or stapler anyway, the company provides them' (1990:27). To avoid such misunderstandings, explicit teaching of such differences need to be highlighted.

Differences in conceptual thinking also have an impact on the materials used in class. Quite often, the tools used in some activities may fail to generate the expected results. This is especially the case for new members of a group who haven't been socialized into the routine patterns of the language class. Take for example the 'family tree' diagrammatic pattern commonly used in generating vocabulary through grouping and association. Achren (1991:31) found that 'The family tree is very abstract and commonly depicts a western concept of family'. If such conceptual differences are raised in the classroom, the learning process can become less threatening and more diverse, with careful attention to avoid patronizing students.

Authentic materials are also another valuable resource, which can offer a real motivation and sense of achievement. More obvious considerations such as sex, religion and level of language can be

dealt with quite quickly. However, more ‘invisible’ elements need to be addressed to the teacher looking for useful material. Some idioms may share a common or similar metaphor, but the outcome may be misinterpreted due to cultural references. Darian (2001) gives a good example of using a newspaper with the headline ‘Zambia has put over 145 state-owned companies under the hammer’. The feeling from this headline may be interpreted as negative, but the reference to an auctioneer’s hammer could be missed.

The issue of what communicative value the resource has is also important, if the learner wants to improve their conversational ability. Again, the ‘civilization’ approach may be employed because of its explicit cultural content rather than its sociolinguistic or pragmalinguistic content, which could help interaction skills within a discourse.

#### **4. Language retention and transfer methods**

There are a lot of difficulties which are evident in the retention of culturally relevant material. One consideration is the extent to which the learner wants to be involved in the foreign language. From contact time in the classroom, many students learn English to communicate on travels, speak with native English speakers in Japan or for future work prospects. Their aims, then, are not to imitate a native English speaker, but to use it on occasions. To live and breathe a new culture must be very difficult, and very few learners aspire to do that. As Crozet and Liddicoat (1997:17-18) put it, ‘The aim of a language is not to assimilate the learner into the native-speaker community, but rather to encourage them to adopt a position in which they are comfortable in dealing with native speakers and are able to achieve their personal and communicative goals’. With this in mind, the experience of a new culture and different cultural constraints may not be so threatening. The learner is not expected change their identity but be aware of the differences, and the impact on communication.

Pragmatic failure is another important aspect of culture in language learning and teaching. Thomas (1983) argued that whilst grammatical error reflects poor use of language, pragmatic failure reflects badly on the person. This is therefore a vital part in culture and language use. It should be stressed that the teacher is not trying to impose Anglo-cultural values, but to give the tools required for freedom of expression. If students are made aware of this, a greater significance can be attached to the language being studied, and the concepts surrounding the lexis can be substantiated.

Again, there are some aspects to communication, which are universal, such as behaving in a polite manner. It is the teacher’s responsibility to make explicit what is appropriate. The issue of social conduct can be a delicate one. Students may resent their own approaches to communication being considered ‘good’ or ‘bad’ in the classroom, especially by someone they are not too familiar with. Therefore, a more appropriate approach is not to correct, but to point out and discuss.

The importance of pragmatic competence may have stronger repercussions for the higher-level speakers, as high linguistic proficiency may lead others to expect high pragmatic competence (Bardovi-Harlig, Hartford, Mahan-Taylor, Morgan, and Reynolds, 1991). This illustrates potential student frustration, having acquired the perceived English skill, but still unable to use it.

When the learner is not aware of the model of discourse and/ or pragmatic issues at stake, the target language may be placed on top of their own discourse conventions for the speech act in question. Bardovi-Harlig et al (1991) use the act of ‘saying goodbye’ to illustrate this problem. They argue that knowing how to say ‘goodbye’ in one’s own native language does not guarantee success in another language. Emphasis is also on the culture specific nature of closing on the level of obligation and structure. The statement implies that we, as teachers must take special care to avoid

assumptions about cultural norms and procedures.

Even when an activity appears to be the same across cultures, there may be different assumptions as to what and how the activity should be carried out. A good example of this is from Miller's (1994) study of American and Japanese communication failure in the situation of a meeting. The Japanese business people in the study had perceived the meeting with the American counterparts as one of confirming decisions already made, (known as 'nemawashi' - the act of carrying out the important decisions prior to a meeting), whilst the American party expected the meeting to represent the start of any decision-making. This caused serious problems, and carries implications for business English instruction as well as an assessment of other cultural patterns of communication previously overlooked.

Short verbal responses such as back-channeling are often over looked, as it isn't usually taught in formal English grammar. For example, overlapping speech is common in Japanese language to show the listener is paying attention or agreeing. Lo Castro (1987:103) pointed out the culture specific nature of such conversational back channeling in Japanese when she stated 'even in situations where they completely disagree with what the speaker is saying, only means they are attending to what is being said'.

This kind of discourse transfer could disrupt effective communication, with the possibility of more serious implications. As the conversational routine takes place between people in a situation, non-verbal communication is evident, but rarely taught. The problems of misinterpretation which arise are both experienced by the teacher and student.

Damen (1987:302) gave a familiar example: 'Lowered eyes and bowed heads, rather than silence, are more likely to be nonverbal signs indicating no response is forthcoming'. If teachers are not aware of this, the students and teachers cannot meet the standards expected. In universities, it would be a good idea to incorporate such aspects in training sessions and curriculum goals for English conversation classes.

The extent to which nonverbal behavior plays a part in communication is illustrated when Ochs (1998:9) states: 'Members of a community partially share postures, movements, and verbal means for indicating the nature of activity occurring'. Even issues regarding the use of 'shrugging' in non-verbal communication have been raised, with regards to the lack of inclusion in a language curriculum (Gou, 1999). Gumperz (1982) also claimed that a large proportion of communication misunderstandings were due to different perceptions and misinterpretations of minor facial and gestural signs. There have also been extensive research on the role and function of 'non-linguistic communication', which is covered under a more general term 'multimodality', such as gesture (Kendon, 2004; McNeill, 2000), proxemics (Hall, 1966) and posture (Ditman, 1987). Considering the examples above, nonverbal behavior is an aspect of communication which clearly requires 'live' practice and actual physical movement in the classroom.

## **5. Culture specific aspects of the teacher and learner role**

Different perceptions about teacher and student behavior, as well as the misunderstandings which follow, have already been discussed. It is the role of the teacher to include such culturally based aspects of behavior into the lesson. Assumptions need to be questioned and raised in a manner as to avoid any hierarchical differentiations in the comparison of cultures. This would seem to be consistent with the definition of learning as the incorporation of new information into old sets of beliefs and knowledge by the student for the purpose of maintaining a consistent "world view"

(Janssen, 2000).

Student and teacher expectations can also be different. Aims of the lesson may need to be made explicit, especially with a multicultural group, where perceptions of learning English may be very different. Some language teachers found that students expected a teacher to assist them with English grammar rather than to use the “problem solving” approach to get to the core of the unknown themselves’ (Thomas, 1983). This issue is a common one where learners have very limited experience or knowledge of applied language, and tend to assume that written and spoken English are the same. Burns and Joyce (2002:12) summarise the differences as both drawing on ‘the same vocabulary and grammatical resources of the language but they utilise them in different ways’. The term multicultural in the classroom context could also include students from different prefectures and schools, where learning styles and perceptions can vary greatly. The teacher is in a position of higher power, and as a ‘gatekeeper’ of an educational institution, the teacher has responsibilities for ensuring effective teaching and understanding.

With language learning and teaching, expectations in comparison to native speakers must also be considered. Thomas (1983) has stated accurately that often students are not allowed to innovate linguistically, and that there can be expectations of the student to be ‘hypercorrect’ (29). It is therefore the role of the teacher to assess themselves as well as their students, and understand the multitude of implications which are part of cross-cultural language teaching.

## 6. Conclusion

From the above discussion points, it seems evident that language learning and teaching is intrinsically linked to culture. A greater understanding of a foreign language and culture can provide opportunities for positive self-assessment, as well as provide a stimulating and rewarding learning experience. As culture is not static, both teacher and learner have an unlimited resource upon which to understand and develop, participating within an ever changing, multicultural world.

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 8/ Jan. / 2010 Received 16/ Feb. / 2010 Accepted