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How do (and Should) We Teach Culture?
Challenges and Limitations in Teaching Culture
in the Context of ELT

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How do (and Should) We Teach Culture? Challenges and Limitations in Teaching Culture in the Context of ELT

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Abstract

Culture is already part of the second/foreign language curriculum. It has always been part of area studies and similar curricula. However, being a social substance, culture has a lot of meaning and interpretations. This paper will discuss the difficulties and limitations of teaching culture, specifically in the global context of ELT.

I will first look at a number of factors that we should take into consideration when teaching culture and language. I will discuss the need to look at global interdependence as a more feasible alternative to the traditional us-vs-them mentality promoted by nation-states. I argue that a view of global interdependence really fosters global development, embraces intercultural differences, and views the "other" as an ally rather than a threat.

In this paper, I will also discuss the following questions: Can we teach the culture of a country and its language without a broader context? How can we incorporate this context into a class? What changes should we make to take into account recent trends in social, political, and economic development? How appropriate is it to teach the language of one country (e.g. American or British English) disconnected from other languages and cultures? What should we emphasize more: grammar, perfection of style or understanding and motivation?

Introduction

Reflecting on the debates on bilingualism policy in Colombia and different discussions around foreign language learning and the role of culture when learning and teaching a language, I realized that the role of the language and culture around it still needs further considerations and clarifications. The main point of stumbling in these discussions is, as I see it, a nationalist or parochial mindset. Since the appearance of the nation states in the 18th and 19th centuries, language has been a significant marker of the national identity and a state policy. However, with globalization and the increase of interdependence and interconnection of cultures and languages – which, by the way, have always been interconnected with other cultures and languages and mutually influenced each other (Waldron, 2003) – borders and forced belonging by birth stop making much sense. In this paper, I would like to suggest a way of reconsidering how we understand culture while discussing how it may affect the teaching of language.

Because of its multiple meanings, complex structure, and constant evolution and changing role in today's global context, I propose that it is important to study culture as a dynamic system while emphasizing students' and teachers' learning competences. The presentation consists of two parts: the first part will create a conceptual framework and discuss the nature of culture and the process of cultural conditioning. Meanwhile, the second part will discuss some practical suggestions of how we can bring culture to the ELT classroom.

Concepts that We Need To Keep in Mind

I would like to start suggesting a question for readers to consider: Could you briefly describe your culture so that it would reflect its true reality?

Understanding Culture

In order to start reconsidering culture one should think of three main questions: (a) What is culture?; (b) How does one acquire culture?; and (c)Whose culture is it?

What is culture?

In social science, culture is mental program (Hofstede, 1984). The two goals of this programming are communication and adaptation. Culture, thus, is approached as a social construct that bears a clear social meaning. Language, as an important tool of communication, is a part of a culture and shares its characteristics.

How does one acquire culture?

The first question inside this one is who is acquiring language and culture. The answer is obvious – an individual. An individual may acquire culture and language through exposure to the process of cultural conditioning. I used the verb may, because the quality and extent of the results depend on many factors including personal qualities of both the learner and the teacher. Cultural conditioning goes two ways: enculturation (first culture conditioning) and acculturation (second culture conditioning). Both processes aim at achieving a necessary degree of effectiveness and appropriateness in communication within one culture or at the intercultural level (Cortazzi & Jin, 1999; Grunlan & Mayers, 1988).

In the context of ELT, we are more likely to deal with acculturation, since both students and teachers went through the process of enculturation within their own cultures and now are exposing themselves to the new culture, even if it this sometimes only happens in the classroom. They are adjusting their knowledge to the new situation. We can bring the experience of enculturation back into the picture and use it in ELT studies for better understanding of the object of studies, for motivation purposes, or as sources of knowledge.

Whose culture is it anyway?

For nationalism, cultural characteristics and language are used as markers of the borders of ethnic (or national) groups. Within this consciousness, the outsider, or the Other, is seen as both collective and abstract. Every individual Other automatically receives all the characteristics of the collective one. In fact, cultural stereotypes and othering may be very strong and be triggered automatically as soon as the encounter happens. More often than not, meeting the outsider, or the Other, causes tension. As Kapuściński (1990) wrote, tension appears as soon as a person crosses the border of their racial zone, "at once we feel like others surrounded by other others" (p. 54). The reason for this tension is that isolated uniqueness is ruined and one realizes that "all of us inhabitants of our planet are Other for Others" (Kapuściński, 2005).

However, it is very difficult to imagine a situation where a person would not be surrounded by Others. Meeting the Other and positioning one's Self before the Other is part of socialization – both enculturation and acculturation. The presence of the Other is essential for building one's own identity (and its correspondingly national identity). A Nationalist approach to culture, though, does not allow for interconnections among all cultures. Despite all the uniqueness of certain group characteristics, cultures are not isolated, but like any individual surrounded by other individuals with their own unique features, connected and dependant on them.

Of course, cultural stereotypes continue to be an important regulatory tool and influence individual decision making (Bermeo, 2004; Combs, Richards, & Richards, 1988; Mach, 1993). Based on generalization,

they are not necessarily false, but definitely simplify the reality and do not reflect the true picture about it and the encountered Other.

An instrumentalist approach to culture, on the other hand, emphasizes its dynamic and constantly developing nature (Aneas & Sandin, 2009). It helps to see that culture is something inherent in all human behavior and not a possession of a certain nation and that any cultural expression is socially situated.

Socialization is another word that is used in sociology to describe cultural conditioning. This term reveals the true nature of the process. It is not just the acquisition of competencies in this culture or another. Since culture, as we established earlier, is a social construct formed in the process of human development and for the purpose of affective functioning of the society (or any group), it is the process of acquisition of social communicative competencies.

What are these competencies? There are several models framing social skills (or competencies) in general repeating each other. I am employing a quadripartite model, developed by Felner and colleagues (1990) as the most detailed one. According to this model (in Nangle, Grover, Holleb, et al., 2009), social competences include: (a) cognitive skills and abilities (cultural and social knowledge, ability to process information), (b) behavioral skills ("knowledge of behavioral responses and ability to enact them", include communicational skills), (c) emotional competencies ("affective regulation and coping capacity"), and (e) motivational and expectancy sets, which include "an individual's value structure, moral development, and sense of efficacy and control" (p. 14). Existing definitions of cross- or intercultural competence (e.g. Culture matters; Bennett, 1993; Bennett & Bennett, 2004; Fantini, 2005) overlap with this model.

I consider this approach to culture and language more valid in the context of ELT. The possibility of inter-personal communication in the context of ELT is much higher than communication at the group-to-group level. Hence, individual behavior motivation should be the focal point of consideration.

The individualist approach is also important for the following two reasons. First, as many scholars recognize, besides the so-called socio-cultural cognition, there is individual cognition (van Dijk, 1997; Monaghan & Just, 2000; Kapuściński, 2004). As Teun van Dijk argued, "making sense, understanding [...] belong not only to the realm of discourse structures and social interaction, but also to that of mind" (van Dijk, 1997, p. 17). This means that knowledge of the language or even cross-cultural experience does not guarantee understanding, and cultural exposure does not guarantee knowledge.

Second, the role of individual and their freedom in choosing beliefs and values increased with modernization. Moreover, globalization provides information about other cultures, a possibility for mixture and inter-influence of cultural habits, and an opportunity to gain new experience; in other words, the chance to develop cross-cultural awareness. Together with the tendency to individualization, it may create

the appearance of acultural individuals who are neither emotionally attached to the culture of their origin nor have any long-term attachment to any other culture.

Individual behavior motivation is much more complex than group motivation. At the individual level, cultural affiliation is just one level of identity. Scholars (e.g. Wallerstein, 1997; Robertson, 1997; Hofstede, 1984) define three levels of the values to consider when analyzing human behavior: individual or personal (inherent to an individual), cultural or culture-specific (typical for a certain cultural group), and culture-general or universal (shared by every culture).

We can still agree with the statement that communication is not culture-free (Culture Matters, p. 75; Cortazzi & Jin, 1999), while defining culture from the individual perspective – much broader than belonging to a certain group. Thus, the factors that define individual behavioral motivation include, but are not limited to, social, class, political, cultural group allegiances, age, level of education and experience, memories and emotional associations, mood, and temperament, among others.

To help a student not to get lost in the diversity of voices that may look anarchical to them when we break the conventional borders of culture as an attribute of a nation-state and to maximize the objectivity of the picture for effective communication, we need to promote an individual-level approach, emphasizing individual behaviors over group characteristics (cultural and ethnic stereotypes), and developing inter-personal (social) instead of inter-cultural communication skills (competences).

Testing Culture – Meeting the Other

Learning or teaching another culture and language involves encountering the Other. It is difficult to imagine the situation when you are not meeting the Other. As I mentioned earlier, the Other is a key for building one's Self. As psychologists agree, individuality cannot form outside the society; belonging is one of a healthy individual's needs. However, from the perspective of the humanistic psychology (e.g. Jung, Fromm, Maslow, Rogers), a healthy personality develops certain individual autonomy and even, as Maslow argued (in Eddington & Schuman, 2006), resistance to enculturation.

A healthy personality, as Maslow explained (in Eddington & Schuman,2006), is a self-actualizing personality, meaning a personality that concerns higher needs such as "fulfilling their potentialities, knowing and understanding the world around them, enriching the experience of living" (p. 8). Healthy relations to others involve a feeling of relatedness to the others, but as care and responsibility for the other, knowledge about the other, respect of the other, and involvement. The emphasis, however, is made on the individual and not the society. As Fromm argued (in Eddington & Schuman, 2006), "mental health is based on society's ability to adjust to the basic needs of all individuals" (p. 6), not the other way around..

Teaching Culture

I see two big problems that cause the whole debate about the role of culture and motivation in the context of ELT: (a) the fact that English is taken out of context and taught as something isolated and abstract; (b) the limitations of the ELT classroom that, briefly described, focus on the students' learning goals and lack of resources. In this section I am going to discuss how we can apply the aforementioned theoretical framework in the ELT classroom and overcome the limitations of the ELT context.

Challenges on the Way of Overcoming Limitations of the ELT Classroom

As a follow-up to the theoretical framework discussed in the previous section, I argue that for the sake of motivation, progress and application of the acquired knowledge, it is important that teachers and students be aware of the following aspects:

- to learn to understand that the language and culture are not an abstract entity. It is like the source language and culture, meaning it is a tool used for the same purpose of adaptation;
- language, including its all structural elements, was created as a communicative tool of a culture, whose role is effectiveness and appropriateness;
- since culture and language are constructs, they are dynamic, changing and living. It is not just content, but a system and a process;
- cultures do not develop in isolation, the interaction of cultures increases under globalization: many aspects get borrowed and adopted often unconsciously;
- as a logical follow-up of the first two ones, the emphasis shifts to the individual, personal competences, inter-personal communication;

Since personality does not develop in isolation, we have to study culture, but only as one of the factors influencing the individual's reaction or response in communication. Teachers and students should be aware of the differences within one cultural group that can be even more drastic than differences between representatives of the same social strata or level of education from different countries. Other factors influencing on individual's communicative reaction are psychological features, political affiliations, social status, life experience, and level of education, to name a few. That all affects the kind of language the person will use.

The Learning Process and its Components

The process of learning includes at least three immediate elements: a teacher (and a textbook), a learner, and the subject.

What is the role of teachers and learners in this process?

As discussed in children's acquisition of language, both a learner and a teacher carry the responsibility for the result and both are learners (Tomasello, 2001). A teacher, besides and in addition to everything else, is a co-learner – whether we speak about a native speaker of the target language or a native speaker of the source language. In fact, a native speaker of the language of the target culture is not necessarily the best source of cultural knowledge. After all it is not the belonging to a group that defines your knowledge, intelligence and teaching ability. Co-learning is an essence of the dialogue between the Self and the Other that is seen as a true meeting the Other and the way of learning and understanding, the Other, Self and the world in the philosophy of the Other (e.g. Tischner, Lévinas, Buber, Kapuściński), that helps to minimize the stress of meeting the Other and the new. Co-learning relations between a student and a teacher can be a good model for both of them of the building relations with the Other represented by the new language and its culture in the ELT classroom, a foreign person when traveling or in the streets of one's hometown, or even a person sharing one's national affiliation but still bearing a different individual culture.

Another element of the learning/teaching process in addition to the teacher – a workbook has to be part of the dialogue process between the learner and the teacher. It does not necessarily mean that a student and a teacher have to negotiate what textbook to choose, which does not make sense at all in the situation of no choice and lack of resources. What I mean is that workbooks by its nature are subjective and reflect only a snapshot of the language and its culture. Quite often they reflect the source culture (i.e. the country that produced the textbook) rather than the target culture. The case of the English language is complicated by the big variety of Englishes and cultures they present. We can overcome this drawback through constant dialogue and discussion.

What is the subject?

Educators, teacher educators, and curriculum designers are all wondering how to teach culture on a more frequent basis. Within the areas of cultural studies, art, and area studies, the problem that is most often discussed is diversity defined as bringing a broader variety of the regions in different areas of cultural studies. Focus on one culture may result in students' failure to see it as part of broader processes. However, no matter how many cultures we include in the discussion, many others will always be (unjustly) excluded.

Summarizing what I discussed earlier in the paper, the speaker's skills, competences and knowledge, and not the language itself, should really be the focus. Speaking of knowledge I mean not only country-specific knowledge, but general intelligence. Social skills and competencies (not specifically cross-cultural competencies) are the keys to understanding culture and crucial for effective communication and must be in the center of studies of culture and ELT as such.

Both the student and the teacher need to remember that learning a language is part of the process of learning about the world and the Self. Creativity, curiosity, and the desire to constantly learn more, as well as a sincere interest in the language, culture and the Other are crucial in achieving progress and both teachers and students should cherish ti. In practical terms, students' and teachers' attention and enthusiasm are crucial. If we keep in mind that everything we learn is only part of the truth and does not reflect the whole truth, students and teachers should follow a more reflective ethnographic approach, meaning collecting and taking into consideration without any normative evaluation.

Of course, cultural group characteristics are reflected in the language. When learning language as a nation's attribute, one can consider cultural knowledge in the form of folklore, and cultural stereotypes (including auto-stereotypes). It helps to develop a sense of appreciation and can also be handy as an ice-breaker in conversation. Awareness of certain peculiarities of the region of the target language can save time in the adaptation process so that students may focus on other things, such as their immediate purpose for the trip or conversation.

The learning process in this case may reproduce the process of enculturation, but with an emphasis on the importance of Self-developing as Self-actualizing. This can involve the reproduction of typical everyday situations and their discussions: a typical look of an average town, country side, streets, home interior, stores, restaurants, and offices; discussions of songs and poems (including children's rhymes and lullabies), school books (including literary works, historical events and figures included in the school programs), most typical movies (for example, those shown every year for Christmas), most typical TV shows[1], sport games, pastimes and typical toys, and language connected with that. It also may be useful to reproduce and discuss ways of learning in the selected country; political, economic, ethnic situation, but also the ways and manner it is discussed and shown in the country; relations with the neighboring countries and world picture; main travelling destinations: who travels where, purpose of traveling, and so on.

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[1] On the adequacy of the usage of popular TV show in the ELT classroom as a cultural and linguistic source see Mora (2004, 2006)

Students' perspective communication partners are more likely to be of their age (and possibly their social level and educational levels), so it is wise to start with the attributes of their generation (and social strata).

Nonverbal communication is part of enculturation and so maybe included in the program (observation, discussion, reproduction). Other cultural things worth to be aware of are attitude to power and power distance, towards certainty and uncertainty, doing and being, locus of control, etc. Also, the political situation in the target region and the different attitudes toward the language and their own culture are also important considerations when building a curriculum and focusing more on grammar, vocabulary, or general knowledge about target culture.

As it was often mentioned at the different presentations in the Colloquia there are different sources of information about the target language and culture that we can use inside and beyond the classroom, as well as ways of meeting the Others without leaving the source country. Useful resources include various social networks and virtual communities and different communication tools, such as video websites, or blogs.

However, learners should understand that all this information is only part of the bigger picture, a little snapshot, that opens doors for them to learning more about themselves. In practical terms, for instance through group projects and discussions with their class mates, students may use the language and culture they are studying to discover more about their individual cultures and local culture: about stereotypes, and – which is more important – about differences within it.

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