

Boundaries of Culture and EFL Teaching

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This essay examines what role and to what extent, the teaching of culture might be important in TEFL teaching generally, and more particularly in Japan. Is the relationship between culture and language really so inextricable that neither can be made sense of separately? Some make this claim, but on what grounds? To find out, this essay first explores how mediocre foreign language learning results, together with the complexities of second language acquisition, have inadvertently emphasized the success of first language acquisition. Then it shows, to the extent that it is practicable, how certain aspects of the latter have come to be emulated in TEFL practice, and how culture is the most recent aspect to attract a number of proponents. There follows a history of the shifting roles the TEFL industry has allocated culture over the years. Some space is devoted to an outline of just how culture comes to be so comingled with language. Then the fact that there are different cultures and different languages leads to a consideration, with the help of Whorf's hypothesis, Searle's speech act theory and Grice's 'maxims', of the affective construct known as social distance. Bridging this divide raises questions about what is involved in acculturation. Whilst some degree of acculturation is expedient for ESL learners, this is more contentious for EFL learners. Finally, some ideas are presented with regard to cultural content most useful for including in university classes in Japan.

Background

Given the efforts and resources put into foreign language teaching, it would be evasive to deny the widespread disappointment that exists, almost everywhere, with the results of foreign language learning, results which lag far behind what might be expected. Though some claim that the language learning industry has facilitated globalization, it can be argued just as persuasively that advances in language teaching look very meager alongside advances in electronics, aviation design, political initiatives, financial tools, and such like. The latter, in truth, have probably been repeatedly stymied by inadequate language learning. Even the emergence of a global lingua franca (English as it happens) is testimony to the fact that SLA research to date has not yielded knowledge of how to learn a second language significantly more quickly, after all, if it

had, we could all be multilingual and would have no need to adopt one language as an international standard. It is also of course, testimony to the complexities of learning a second language, putting mother-tongue acquisition in ever starker contrast for its extraordinary success. It is alluring to speculate on aspects of first language acquisition, wondering which processes, if emulated, might also emulate some of the effectiveness of first-language acquisition. Such enthusiasm for transposing what works well (or does not) in one place, to (or away from) another, can be seen in the historical course of EFL pedagogy. For example, shifts away from a predominance of explicit grammar teaching (on the ground that it makes negligible difference in first-language acquisition), to adoption of a functional syllabus, and communicative methodologies. More recently, this train of thought has continued with enthusiasm for immersion methods, authentic texts, and content syllabi, or content and language integrated learning (CLIL). It is true that these developments have something important to offer the learner of a second language, but one crucial point, too easily glossed over, is that their discernible benefits only pertain to particular stages along the SLA learning curve. Moreover, since language learning is probably interactionist, rather than just computational, the effectiveness of any one aspect alone, is likely significantly undermined. Even so, most recently, yet another fundamental aspect of first language acquisition is increasingly vying for inclusion in EFL teaching, namely the teaching of culture.

Historical Background

The inclusion of cultural aspects might not seem like any big development. After all, back in the pre-global 1960s and 70s, along with the glossy covers of LPs and later cassettes of the audio-lingual method, an element of culture was included in most courses. Though not quite culture with a big ‘C’, this nevertheless hinted at foreign ‘high culture’. As an adjunct to language teaching it concerned itself with ‘life and institutions’ (inevitably of the culture of the language being studied rather than of the learners’ culture), often serving as a contextual backdrop to language tasks. Iconic tourist brochure images reinforced Britishness or Frenchness as an alluring motivational spur. They accurately heralded the time of foreign travel becoming no longer a preserve of just the privileged.

As we know, in the 70s and 80s, with the might of the U.S. economy and the global reach of the British Commonwealth, the marginal edge offered by the English language in utility over other languages for international business, education, and

diplomacy grew to such an extent that it soon outpaced any other candidate (including the culturally neutral Esperanto). The cold war meant that English vied chiefly with Russian, so notions of culture tended to be subsumed into the ideological plot, pitting free-market economies against communist ones. In this scenario, 'the culture of the west' was broadly promoted by media such as the V.O.A., and B.B.C. Worldservice. The gamut of the British Council, ostensibly a cultural and trade institution included however, direct TEFL teaching. Of course, the same could be said of the Alliance Francaise, or the Goethe Institut for instance, not to mention their Russian counterparts. However, unlike other languages, a succession of events had put English well on its way to becoming the standard international language. The various U.N. agencies, the World Bank, the I.M.F., the expanding E.E.C., the power-play of middle-east oil, the rise of Japanese industrial know-how, the collapse of the Soviet Union, the domination of electronics manufacturing by Taiwan and South Korea, the eventual emergence of China as a massive manufacturing center dependent on global markets, the rise of migrant labor, the competitiveness for good jobs forcing huge expansion of higher education; These and many more similar developments inexorably increased the demand for English as a global lingua franca. In other words, nearly all of the demand for EFL correlates directly to factors other than an expressed interest in the cultures of native English speakers.

This new demand meant for the first time that large numbers of people were learning EFL who had no particular linguistic bent (a common enough situation in ESL). Moreover, learner's goals were pragmatic rather than academic, and their motivation was more instrumental than intrinsic. These factors were the important background (though seldom fully recognized) that prompted the emergence in the late 70s of communicative methodologies. With these methodologies teachers could easily address classes, comprised of various students and various mother tongues, without detailed knowledge of other grammars. Teaching became less formal, and more animated, leading some, rather ironically, to committing cultural faux pas. Somewhat fearful of being tagged 'neo colonialist' for introducing such methods internationally, EFL teacher-training courses started to include caveats on respecting 'cultural' differences, especially with regard to the dangers of misinterpreting gesture, body language, physical proximity, dress, food, the teacher's role, status, gender differences, small talk, silence, eye contact, directness and such like. In this guise the term 'cultural' often served as a euphemism for what essentially were religious differences. Even though, the TEFL industry had clearly moved on to a much broader definition of culture along the lines of Geertz (1973) who described culture as, "A whole way of life, embracing all the

behaviors, symbols, beliefs, and value systems of a society.” An insight certainly assisted by the backdrop of mass immigration, leading to an increasingly multi-cultural Britain. The EFL publishing industry’s marketing imperatives, and political caution, led to the marginalization and almost complete exclusion of culturally specific content on the grounds that doing so would imply the superiority of the ‘target’ culture; A ‘target’ that in any case had spread practically global. This dichotomy between sociolinguistic theory and EFL teaching practice continues today with only the slightest impact from the notion of an integrated language and culture syllabus (Byram *et al.*, 1994). Meanwhile it seemed, rather ironically, not only did sociologists, understand that language was an important part of culture, but also linguists and educators understood that culture was therefore inevitably an important part of language! With such overwhelming agreement about language and culture being very much bound up with each other, it is worth outlining briefly how this mingling of culture and language is understood to come about.

Language in Culture in Language

Norms of etiquette, politeness, communication, behavior, and interpretation are the way a comprehensible and predictable order to any society becomes established. This is culture emerging, a social culture. Over time this social culture becomes reinforced and enhanced by its material productions, technological achievements, monuments, works of art, developments of government, religion, law, finance and trade, and so on. Each generation adds its history to the stack, pressing a historical identity on to the social culture. The advent of writing, and later print, raise the consciousness of people in that culture, reinforcing a sense of belonging. These social and historical dimensions are even added to by imaginary works, so that Dicken’s part-fictional London say, or even Rowling’s entirely fantastical Hogwarts, enter the common stock of knowledge. The words that members of a speech community use refer to that stock of knowledge about the world that other members of that community likely share, not least, the language itself (though individual cultural literacy is of course variable). Speakers help bring about their social identity by their use of language which symbolizes their cultural reality, distinct from other cultures. And this cultural reality is expressed by words, which reflect attitudes, beliefs, and points of view. Particular meanings come to be adopted by the speech community. This connotative language, inextricably intertwined with culture, corresponds to various forms of socialization or acculturation. By defining ourselves as insiders we do so in contrast to others, others who by default become

outsiders to us (though of course insiders to another culture and speech community). Please refer to appendix 1 for an illustration of this situation made poignant with the aid of wit. So, what factors are at play when people, with different mother tongues, and from different speech communities, meet? Four insights that may be useful come from the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, general semantics, Searle's Speech Act Theory, and Grice's Cooperative Principle.

The Intercultural Gradient - Social Distance

It turns out that even if (hypothetically) the *only* difference between the two speech communities were to be different languages, this could lead, according to the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, to different thinking and behavior. This claim asserts that the interdependence of language and thought means that the language one habitually uses influences (constrains) both the scope and the inclination of one's thoughts. It is not difficult to see how this idea provokes unease, lending weight to ideas of 'superior' languages (and 'target' cultures), onward to Darwin's concept of the 'fittest', and the historical tragedy of the playing out of the whole misguided eugenics march to the 'final solution'. Moreover, the claim met scorn from scientists, because it implied that scientific discoveries were not necessarily universally valid, but might be contingent upon the language in which such laws were expressed! In any case, ran another counter-argument, languages are translatable into equivalents, are they not? Well, actually not quite! After 50 years of social science research we know that, although languages can be mutually translated, there remain hurdles of differing viewpoints, differing interpretations, and disagreement on the meaning and value of the concepts underlying the words. So, actually, a weaker version of Whorf's hypothesis is generally accepted nowadays.

Self evidently the languages are different, so in theory, if participants have successfully learned the others' language (hypothetically devoid of any culture beyond what might be termed a basic 'universal' culture) their interpretations will not pick up on connotations. There will only be a straightforward understanding of language that is denotative. Yet in practice, there would be many gaps in their knowledge of the second language, leading to misunderstandings and repeated requests for clarification. There is likely to be some common ground between the two cultures over and above the aforementioned universal culture. Moreover, it is most unlikely that anybody spending sufficient time to develop a second language would not in the process become aware of

cultural elements pertaining to the target language, and some notion of the extent of dissimilarity between the two cultures, more usually termed 'social distance'.

John R. Searle further emphasizes the influence and role of culture at play here, in what has come to be known as Speech Act Theory. He points out that each interlocutor's experience in her culture establishes structures of expectation in her mind, known as schemata. Whereas a straightforward utterance, termed a 'locutionary act' will not carry connotations, the situation is much more complex when the real intended meaning of utterances depends on decoding schemata-dependent connotations. He termed these 'illocutionary acts', and went on to classify several types including especially 'indirect speech acts' and 'declaratives'.

Searle's work had followed substantially on from Paul Grice's unfortunately named, 'Maxims' or 'Cooperative Principle'. These are not so much maxims as presumptions about utterances, presumptions that listeners rely on, and speakers use or exploit. Usually and nearly universally the claim is that maxims of quality, quantity, relevance, and manner are respected (though Japan is not so universal with regard to the maxim of quantity). Thus, utterances that fall short of these maxims are exceptions that warrant particular scrutiny. Grice recognized three types of maxim default. Firstly, if the overt, surface meaning of an utterance does not seem to be consistent with these maxims, and yet the situation leads the listener to believe that the speaker believes herself to be respecting the 'cooperative principle', listeners take this as a cue to look for other meanings that could be implied by the questionable utterance. Secondly, any of the maxims can of course be intentionally 'flouted' by the speaker sufficiently blatantly for the listener to be expected to understand the message, as with sarcasm or irony. Thirdly, the speaker can 'violate' any of the maxims by not merely flouting but doing so discretely enough for the listener not to be expected to notice.

None of the foregoing offers any kind of taxonomy of variations between cultures, nor tolerance of variations within. Sociologists such as Schumann (1976:136) point to a whole host of factors including contrasts between ethnicity, gender, religion, politics, economics, education, technology, and fashion. Hofstede (1986:312) more interestingly, put a particular focus on the extent to which a society might be labeled either 'collectivist' or 'individualistic'. Sadly, the bigger historical picture shows indisputably that social distance has either been 'bridged' by wars of annihilation, or truces arrived at by the subjugation of one culture to another. A more enlightened 21st century observer, sidestepping all the geopolitics, eugenics, religion, and language issues, ought to emphasize that cultures restrain their *own* members to particular codes of behavior,

with punishment of some kind being metered out for any violation. What is necessary when people of two cultures meet, is for inadvertent violations of the other culture's codes to be pardoned from censure by making a fair plea of 'extenuating circumstances'. Then, rather like children who have yet to learn all the codes and therefore routinely violate them, aliens can be granted a pardon, or at least, an 'acculturation' honeymoon to mitigate against culture shock. This is probably the prevailing approach among the enlightened international community, who in any case constitute something of a sub-culture of their own, possibly an 'interculture'. There must be scope here for some classification of transgressions from the relatively minor hygienic misdemeanor of wiping your nose on your sleeve to more intrusive aspects of behavior, outright insults, and more serious offenses. The issue is made fuzzy by the prickliness of religious taboos, and by the tendency of many to believe in the superiority of their own culture. For example, whilst few Japanese people would likely claim superiority of Shinto or Buddhism, few indeed would consider cuisine in the United States to be on a par with that in Japan!

Cultural Content in EFL Classes

The foregoing and other insights have compelled some, such as Alan Pulverness (p.433), to argue that learners, who may be quite critical readers in their mother tongues, are textually infantilized by the vast majority of culture-sanitized course materials. Others hold the view that language learning should mean achieving a deeper understanding of different cultures, including the learner's own culture, and caution against focusing inadvertently on mere stereotypes. Kramsch (1993), claims for culture not only stronger legitimacy for the coveted title of 'fifth skill' (after listening, speaking, reading, and writing), but pre-eminence for culture, since it is the essential background supporting the other four skills.

It should be made clear that there is no argument about whether or not to teach culture, merely about whether culture should be expressly included in the EFL classroom. Despite its grounding in robust sociolinguistic theory, this matter is not as straightforward as it seems. There are not many objections, but there are numerous complications. In the first place, even a limited definition of 'culture' is a vast subject, likely to steal valuable time from more bona fide language learning (witness the JET program in Japan). Then there is the sensitive issue of by whose authority particular aspects of culture would be deemed representative of that culture? An issue further

complicated by English being used more often as an international standard, lacking any particular territorial identity. There is also the sense that by learning the language itself, learners are empowered to do their own ‘fishing’ at culture. And on top of that, contrastive analyses across cultures show broader common ground than contrastive analyses across languages. Without the need to reference cultural knowledge, operating the first type of maxim default strategy would correct most intercultural ‘offenses’, and in any case, has globalization not sensitized us to this need anyway? It is true that operating the second type of maxim default strategy (recognizing humor) is more difficult in a second language. But, when the humor is beyond the language/culture range of the listener this situation usually becomes obvious, and naturally the situation reverts to the first type of maxim default. Another point is that information about another culture lends itself more readily to input (reading or listening) whereas information about your own culture is something you likely already know about and could therefore attempt to output as communication. As we have already seen, whilst we should respect other cultures, we should not necessarily surrender notions of some aspects of particular cultures having particular merits. Last but far from least, the intertwining of language with culture is much more predominant at higher levels of language, and necessarily reduced in what everyone realizes is the subculture of a classroom.

Cultural Content for EFL University Classes in Japan.

From the foregoing it should be clear that international English offers only an amorphous target culture. Japanese students who go on to use their English will mostly be doing so as an international standard language. As also mentioned, Japanese culture, relatively speaking, falls short of Grice’s maxim of quantity. It is doubtful if many Japanese realize this. Aside from being a relatively irreligious liberal culture, Japanese culture is a markedly collectivist society. In the light of these findings content for a TEFL class could usefully draw attention to these characteristics. As an aid to communicative methodologies Japanese culture, at nearly every level, offers unusual scope for conversation and discussion. As a modern industrial consumer society the ubiquity of J-pop, manga and anime are well known. However, Japanese people who have not traveled overseas, seldom realize that washlets, pachinko, and convenience stores in their Japanese guise, are virtually not to be found in other countries. Does the average Japanese person realize how unpalatable much Japanese food is to non-Japanese until they get accustomed to it? Or, for that matter, how unpalatable Japanese

T.V. broadcasting is once they have become accustomed to that! Young Japanese adults, know little of politics, yet benefit greatly from a liberal constitution. More earnestly, the tragedies of Hiroshima, Nagasaki, and more recently Fukushima, give Japanese youth a particularly poignant voice to contribute to international discussion. Topics such as these and many similar, if handled with a sense of perspective, can provide rich material for EFL lessons while, at the same time, tapping into the cultural schemata of young Japanese.

Conclusion

Becoming an amateur comparative ethnographer is one of the most interesting prospects for the second language learner, and nowadays we have the computer and internet to help in this endeavor. However, it is the background knowledge of our own culture which will serve the purpose of giving us a reference point from which to gauge contrasts with other cultures, and in addition, where the opportunity arises, foster a participation in quid-pro-quo cultural exchange during which it is possible to show evidence of a relativist (non-superior) stance. Although studying other cultures is relevant to a second language, it is not necessarily helpful to include cultural details in language learning tasks, at least not until a reasonable proficiency in the second language has been achieved.

Appendix 1

An illustration of the importance of background information (culture) as opposed to merely the language itself, told as a joke.

A group of prisoners passes the time telling jokes to each other. Unfortunately their repertoire is limited and they soon know all of them by heart; indeed they even start referring to the jokes by number. One prisoner says, 'D'you remember number thirteen?' And everyone chuckles. Another says, 'That reminds me of joke number six!' Again everyone laughs. 'Or how about number twelve?' says another. Everyone chuckles except for one prisoner who starts having hysterics. He laughs until tears fall down his cheeks and his sides hurt. He falls on the floor, rolls about and slaps his thighs cackling uncontrollably. Finally he calms down and notices his friends looking at him stony-faced. 'Sorry,' he says. 'First time I'd heard that one.'

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