



## LANGUAGE AND CULTURE DEVELOPING CULTURAL AWARENESS THROUGH THE TEACHING OF ENGLISH

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**Abstract:** The title of this article may well be one of the questions of any language teacher: "How can I best prepare my students to use the acquired foreign language in real life?" More often than not, confidence to speak in a foreign language is more useful than knowledge of its theoretical aspects, fluency is more important than accuracy, ideas and opinions are more exciting than grammar and vocabulary. The current language policies indicate that linguistic competence must be accompanied by cultural awareness and so it follows that the foreign language teacher's mission is to pass on the knowledge of communicating beyond words, through a language of understanding and tolerance, of appreciation for the other's values, customs and beliefs and an awareness of the different cultures among and around us.

Right under our very eyes, a new India is taking shape. Brick by brick, its seen and un-seen buildings are reaching higher and spreading wider, with the shared aim of creating a strong, prosperous community, governed by common goals and laws. Today, at a larger scale than ever before, mankind is in need of one tongue that would bring clarity and communication to prevent confusion and misunderstanding. Due to the arrival of this high-tech era (which has re-shaped the speed and style of information exchange) and the transformations in political, social and economic relations (which have re-defined physical and cultural borders), present day society is faced with the challenge of building a Bridge – image symbolically engraved on the Euro banknotes. And the one language the 'builders' share more universally in this day and age is, undoubtedly, English.

Why and how English has come to be the index of our social world nowadays is not the focus of this article. The reasons for the internationality of English, both at the intrinsic and the extrinsic levels, are ample and well-explained by numerous unbiased scholars. The fact that English is the tongue spoken as a first language by over 375 million people, as a foreign language by about 750 million people, and that one in four people speak it to a certain degree of competence needs no further demonstrations and apologetics here and now.

What is more important to emphasize is the role of language teachers in paving the way toward this common ground which can only be inhabited by those who share the same values and attitudes. When each generation has learnt to appreciate their own culture and respect the other's, then they will be able to build a solid Bridge together or, better still, to Be that Bridge. "Language, quite simply, is a window through which we can reach out and touch each other's minds. Anyone can reach through it – regardless of race, regardless of belief. It is the most intimate act we can ever perform. We must be sure, always, to keep that window open." (Altmann, 1997: 233)

Keeping the window open, metaphorically, when learning a foreign language means more than acquiring the linguistic knowledge and such an endeavour should necessarily focus on learning how to interpret and create language that is in accordance with the accepted socio-cultural parameters of the specific context. It is universally accepted that without language, it would be difficult to pass on culture along the spatial or generational coordinates, just as it would be to fully understand language without reference to the cultural context which has generated it. Language goes beyond its role of making communication possible and becomes a mirror that reflects the speaker's view of the world. What follows is that culture and language cannot and should not be treated as independent of each other in foreign language teaching. Since they cannot be divorced, the question is not about the inclusion or exclusion of culture in foreign language curricula, but rather about the deliberate immersion versus non-deliberate exposure to it.

Starting from the premise that a language is part of a culture and culture is implicit in a language, Douglas Brown explains that the two are intricately interwoven so that one cannot separate them without losing the significance of either language or culture (Brown, 1994:164). According to him, culture is deeply ingrained into the very fibre of our being, but language – the means for communication among members of a culture – is the most visible and available expression of that culture (Brown, 1994:170).

The knowledge of culture, or being cultivated, makes a great difference for the speaker in general and so much more for the second language speaker. The way the language learner makes use of this knowledge of the foreign cultural environment influences the result of communication with native speakers. If culture is the blueprint that guides the behaviour of people in a community, the person aspiring to learn the foreign language should also be sensitive to the issues and expectations of that group.

Since societies are becoming multicultural, one of the most important issues facing educators today is to encourage respect and understanding for cultural diversity which will lead to communication and cooperation between people and among peoples. The fact that representatives of different cultures come into contact more easily and closely today through the medium of English is reason enough for integrating culture, side by side to linguistic competence, into EFL teaching. The corollary of this perspective is to view the teaching of culture as a means of developing an awareness of, and sensitivity towards, the values and traditions of the people whose language is being studied.

From the point of view of sociolinguists, culture is understood as communication, and the focus is placed both on the ways of communicating – verbally and nonverbally – and on the social situations in which communication takes place. Since language acts as a primary mediator between the individual and society, then it follows that someone's knowledge of different languages enables them to have 'access' to different societies and cultures, thus becoming themselves mediators between cultures.

The term for this is intercultural communication which, at the theoretical level, describes cultural dimensions applicable for all cultures. In practice, intercultural and interpersonal exchanges are implicit of each other and foreign language teaching should cultivate the competence of the learners to communicate appropriately and effectively with people from other cultural backgrounds. Thus, the success of intercultural communication lies beyond mastering language skills and content per se. By teaching more than the grammar, vocabulary and skills of the foreign language, the teachers not only make the classes more interesting but also motivate the students and equip them for authentic encounters with the language being learnt.

It has often been seen that even when a conversational level in a foreign language is achieved, the speaker can easily act as a "fluent fool" due to the fact that "human understanding is by no means guaranteed because conversants share the same dictionary" (Barnlund, 1999:6). The implication is that "learning the cultural roots of a language is essential for meaningful fluency" (Seelye, 1993:275). Understanding a foreign language is no guarantee for understanding the speaker's whole range of meaning and communicating in a second language relies just as much on comprehension of cultural norms and expectations as on linguistic accuracy. Thus, studying the culture alongside the language is considered today to be the fifth skill which is beginning to claim its rightful place in language studies, namely Cultural Awareness.

The term "cultural awareness" is described by Tomalin and Stempleski as "sensitivity to the impact of culturally-induced behaviour on language use and communication" (1998: 5). One of the rules of communication is to be sensitive to the difference between what you say/hear and what the interlocutor says/hears – that is, to be aware that human thought and behaviour differ from one individual and group to another. Weaver's cultural iceberg shows that a large proportion of our own culturally-shaped knowledge is invisible and mostly subconsciously applied in our everyday interactions.

Schematically put, the main reasons for familiarizing learners of the foreign language with the cultural components behind it should be:

- to develop the communicative skills,
- to understand the linguistic and behavioural patterns both of the target and the native culture at a more conscious level,
- to develop intercultural and international understanding,
- to adopt a wider perspective in the perception of the reality,
- to make teaching sessions more enjoyable,
- to develop an awareness of the potential mistakes that might come up in comprehension, interpretation, translation and communication.

Intercultural communicative awareness refers to the intentional sensibility to the impact of culturally induced behavior in communications across cultures. It implies an ability to identify cultural diversity and a desire to develop empathy based on an individual's socio-cultural knowledge relevant to the foreign language context. The implication is that the lack of cultural awareness restricts how the foreign language speaker exploits his linguistic potential. Stern states: "One of the most important aims of culture teaching is to help the learner gain an understanding of the native speaker's perspective." (Stern, 1992:216-217)

Moreover, cultural sensitivity refers to an understanding of one's own culture by comparison and contrast with other people's culture and the impact the respective cultures have on how people think and behave and speak. One of the main doors opened by intercultural communication within the foreign language class is that of appreciating differences without judgemental attitudes, but with the aim of comparing and evaluating. With comparison comes the realization that one's particular behavior, values and beliefs are not the general norm for other social environments; with this realization comes the desire to make contact with people

from outside one's own cultural sphere and learn from them. It is an attitude of open-mindedness and respect for one's neighbour in a multicultural society in which the individual's group is but a part thereof.

Tomlinson (2001) emphasised that cultural awareness leads to "a gradually developing inner sense of the equality of cultures, an increased understanding of your own and other people's cultures, and a positive interest in how cultures both connect and differ. Such awareness can broaden the mind, increase tolerance and facilitate international communication." (Tomlinson, 2001:5) Cultural awareness teaching should be involved with viewpoints, with shifting perspectives from the native to the acquired culture and, in comparing them, with reaching intercultural communicative competence.

In Ibrahim El-Hussari's view, "cultural awareness is a process in which language learning offers an opportunity for students to develop a shared world of interaction and experience through discovering the meaning of text in relation to its context of situation" – in which process "students negotiate and create a new reality by using their own frames of reference, deriving basically from their life world experience and socio-cultural background." (El-Hussari 2007:405) And the language classroom is an example of this interaction with an existing environment in which actors are active cultural beings who form rules and meanings in collaboration with others. Only here and thus can students begin to understand the dialectical relationship between text and context as well as self and other (cf. Kramsch, 1993).

Liddicoat (2002) discusses the two major views toward culture awareness: the static versus the dynamic, where the former does not recognize the link between language and culture while the latter acknowledges the constantly developing nature of culture. The implication to these contrasting views is that, from the static perspective, learners are passive receptors of cultural information, as opposed to the dynamic practice of engaging the learners in the cultural journey through space and time. This latter view also requires learners to possess knowledge and understanding of their own culturally-shaped behaviours.

The specific elements of an integrated teaching approach are described by Tomlinson and Masuhara (2004), who support the theory that increased cultural awareness benefits learners by broadening their mind, increasing their level of tolerance and cultural empathy. The main learning principles of a cultural awareness approach involve the encouragement of:

- learning from experience
- apprehension before comprehension, in that the learner is helped to become aware of something before trying to achieve conscious understanding of it
- affective and cognitive engagement with an encounter, text, or task
- intake responses to an encounter, text, or task in the sense of developing and articulating representations of the experience
- discovering clues to the interpretation of an experience by reflecting on that experience
- tolerance of ambiguity (that is, not worrying about not being able to interpret an experience, or not fixing an immediate and absolute interpretation).

As we have pointed so far, if students wish to achieve a high level of communicative competence in the language they are learning, they have to adapt, as much as possible, to the target culture. The transition beyond the zone of functional language competence and into the realms of near-native competence is only possible through acculturation. It is the positive reaction of someone whose initial attitudes toward the host-culture are tolerance, trust, acceptance, openness. This individual chooses integrative strategies that will help him/her to understand and feel integrated in the new culture. By observing, listening, asking, adjusting and compromising, the open-minded non-native speaker will be attracted (in)to the target culture either partially, through cultural adaptation, or wholly, through assimilation.

Andra Serbanescu (2007) explains the types of acculturation and emphasises the benefits of cultural adaptation. "Adaptation is a way of solving the differences in an individual's effort to understand the other." (2007:278) In this process, the mutual attitudes of the communicators tend to matter more than the similarities/differences of the respective cultures or the linguistic competences. The results are functional adequacy, psychical wellbeing and acquiring an intercultural identity. However, developing cultural sensitivity does not mean that we need to lose our cultural identities, but rather that we recognize cultural influences and adapt to them – as opposed to assimilation, which implies total integration in the mainstream culture.

To sum up, since communication is usually context-related and thus culture-bound, the student of any foreign language must acquire cross-cultural skills. Focusing on accuracy while neglecting the cultural implications would result in misunderstanding or miscommunication. Brown comments that "Misunderstandings are likely to occur between members of different cultures; differences are real and we must learn to deal with them in any situation in which two cultures come into contact." (Brown & Yule, 1987) In order to avoid such short-circuits of communication, especially in the context of the needs and opportunities in today's "global village" when people come into closer and more frequent contact, culture should be fully integrated into the picture of the target language to be learnt/taught. Once the learner has reached the level of critical cultural awareness, the risk of cultural conflicts as the result of stereotypes, prejudice, discrimination or mere misinterpretations decreases.

Thus, the main objectives of a cultural awareness approach in foreign language teaching are to help the learners:

- develop the ability to use language appropriately and effectively in various cultural contexts
- to discover assumptions, values, and attitudes that underlie utterances and behaviors in their own cultures
- to notice implicit conflicts and analyse the causes
- to identify options for solving conflict situations
- to try out options, observe the consequences, and take necessary measures

- to resist falling back on stereotyping and ethnocentrism
- to develop empathy with other cultures

The implication for foreign language teaching/learning is that the shift from a traditional to an intercultural stance enhances students' awareness of the interdependent relationship between language and culture pointing to the need of teaching culture as an integral component of language classes. It is a challenge and incentive for the teachers to develop intercultural perspectives that may have an impact on their language teaching methodology and syllabus design in order to meet the goals of foreign language education in our modern world.

All in all, education for the awareness of cultural diversity is not to be taken lightly. In fact it should be viewed as perhaps one of the most important issues facing educators today. Since societies are becoming and have become multicultural, it is vital to prevent any social uneasiness or conflict due to misinterpretation or misjudgement through an education based on principles of respect for and understanding of cultural diversity, and so to develop communication and cooperation between people of individual origins and universal citizenship. When we are culturally aware that deep down we are all alike but also 'irreducibly unique and different, and that I could have been you, you could have been me, given different circumstances – in other words, that the stranger... is in us' (Kramsch 1996:3), the line of communication is no longer broken and language serves as the cement that will hold the intercultural Bridge together.

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