

# Teaching Culture in the EFL Classroom

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## KEYWORDS

Teaching English as a Foreign Language, language and culture, culture

## Abstract

This paper introduces some of the research on teaching culture in the English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classroom and attempts to summarise the difficulties involved therein, especially when taught to a class of intermediate level students at a Japanese university. Culture and language are inevitably inseparable, as one learns the former at the same time as one learns the latter. However, it is often the case that teachers are not given specific guidelines on the methods of instructing aspects of culture in the foreign language classroom. Some of the main conclusions of this paper suggest each learner have an appropriate grasp of their native culture before they attempt to embrace or understand a foreign one. It is also vital that the language instructor find innovative, interesting and thought-provoking teaching methods in order to effectively introduce intricacies of the foreign culture to language learners.

## Introduction

The author has been involved in Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL) in Japan for eighteen years in various teaching environments, including public elementary and junior high schools, private language schools and third level institutions. One of the most common cultural differences between English speaking countries and Japan that I have felt necessary to teach students about is the way people address each other in everyday conversation. While it is completely natural to address co-workers, friends or family by first name in English speaking countries, many Japanese students of English find this strange and difficult to get used to. This difficulty is quite understandable if one is familiar with Japanese culture where addressing with first-names is reserved for family or informal, close relationships. Allow me to quote Brown (2014) who looks at one learner's experience when studying at a pre-university language institute in the United States. The student, named Kenji, apparently wrote the following entry in his journal, reflecting on his first few months in the United States :

During my 12 years schooling in Japan, I was taught to give utmost respect to my teacher. I must never contradict my teacher; never to speak in class unless I am asked by

teacher to speak ; never call a teacher by first name ; and respect older teachers even more than younger teacher. But in my new U.S.A. language school, my young teachers (graduate students at university) were friendly and want me to call them by a first-name! They ask students to do small group work, which I never did in Japan, and they wanted students to give the answer to problems, rather than them just giving us answer themselves! This made me very confused at first. (p. 199)

While each student's past experience may vary according to their educational background, Kenji's account does illustrate the difference in cultures on how people address one another. His experience reminds me of a similar one which I experienced when I first came to work at a public junior high school in Japan in 2000. While I could speak English and Spanish, my Japanese language ability was limited to simple greetings and I had little knowledge of the way Japanese people addressed teachers and each other. When discussing with my Japanese co-workers at junior high school how students and co-workers should address me, I suggested they call me by my first name, Tomás, hoping to make our relationship closer. Unfortunately, it was decided that the pronunciation of Tomás, being from the Irish language, was too difficult for students and that they should call me Tom instead. As a result, I became to be, I hope affectionately, called Tom *sensei* by all students and many of the townspeople for the five years I spent working at the town board of education. Interestingly, I had never been called Tom in my life until I came to Japan. It was not until much later, when my Japanese speaking ability improved, that I realised I was the only teacher in the school who was addressed by first name.

In order to illustrate this cultural difference in my classes, nowadays I encourage students to address both myself and each other in the first name format during those classes which I instruct in English. On the other hand, in the classes which I tend to instruct in Japanese I address students by family names. I urge them to address myself similarly. This is simply because I consider that if the class is mainly conducted in Japanese, we should obey Japanese customs. This is just one example of the challenges which are posed to the language teacher when attempting to successfully attempting to introduce culture in the foreign language classroom.

## The Relationship between Language and Culture

One may say that culture is a way of life. It is indeed the context in which we live, think, feel emotions and make contact with other human beings. It's our collective identity and what binds people together. According to Larson & Smalley, quoted in Brown (2014) :

culture is a form of blueprint that guides the behaviour of people in a community, is incubated in family life, governs our behaviour in groups, and helps us know what others expect of us and the consequences of not living up to those expectations. (p. 175)

Culture is the ideas, customs, skills, arts and tools that characterise a given group of people in a given period of time. Many scholars from varying academic backgrounds have chosen different ways to describe culture. However, culture is more than the sum of its parts and more than an

amalgamation of all possible definitions. According to Diaz-Rico and Weed, quoted in Hostos (2014), culture can be defined as :

the explicit and implicit patterns for living, the dynamic system of commonly agreed-upon symbols and meanings, knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, customs, behaviors, traditions, and/or habits that are shared and make up the total way of life of a people, as negotiated by individuals in the process of constructing a personal identity. (p. 7)

Other scholars have different interpretations, such as Matsumoto (quoted in Brown, 2014) who explains:

Culture is a dynamic system of rules, explicit and implicit, established by groups in order to ensure their survival, involving attitudes, values, beliefs, norms, and behaviours, shared by a group but harbored differently by each specific unit within the group, communicated across generations, relatively stable but with the potential to change across time. (Brown, 2014, p.24)

Matsumoto's definition suggests that culture is dynamic but also that it has rules that differ from group to group. I can vividly remember one personal experience of a difference in rules in a new culture when undertaking a year of foreign study at the University of Deusto, Bilbao, Spain. It was the culture of *dos besos* which I found particularly intriguingly strange. This is the custom where a female meets a female or a male friend when meeting after an absence and the two parties exchange *dos besos* or "two kisses", one on each cheek. In many cases, both persons simply touch cheeks, but for the author, being a Republic of Ireland national, I was not used to such physical contact and it took a certain amount of time to get used to this refreshing example of culture shock in Spain. Hostos (2014) touches on this aspect by observing that proxemics is an aspect that EFL students must work on for intercultural competence. She says that proxemics is an essential aspect for Latin American ESL learners to manage due to the differences among Latin American's Spanish and English proxemics patterns. Latin American Spanish speakers tend to touch their interlocutors and stay close to them during oral communication while English speakers do not because they belong to a low-contact culture.

Regarding the part of the same definition above that refers to culture as relatively stable but with the potential to change over time, I can think of no more apt sample case than that of the Republic of Ireland where, due to the much-depleted influence of the Catholic Church and its clergy in society, many of the cultural and social rules have undergone a drastic change when compared to society of the 1980s. The legalisation of abortion, divorce, along with the granting of civil partnerships for same-sex couples are notable examples of this change in both Irish culture and society.

Brown, quoted in Saglam (2010), sees the inseparability of both culture and language as follows :

A language is a part of culture and culture is a part of language ; the two are intricately

interwoven so that one cannot separate the two without losing the significance of either language or culture. (p. 15)

Several metaphors have been used to describe culture, including that of an onion by Fons Trompenars in his book *Riding the Waves of Culture*, introduced in Johnson & Rinvulcri (2014). He says the core beliefs of any given society are at the centre of the onion and from these are formed many ‘layers,’ like laws, religion, rituals, education systems, etc. The outer skin of the onion represents aspects of the culture that can be seen by outsiders, like buildings, transport, money and clothes, all of which could be described as ‘products’ of a culture. Although the products change over time, they will reflect the beliefs of the society to which they belong. In other words, each layer has a separate set of values. The outer layers can be easily seen by the visitor. However, there is such a lot to be found in the deeper layers that one will need to experience them over time.

Jiang, quoted in Saglam (2010), analyses the relationship between culture and language from the philosophical, communicative and pragmatic perspectives. From the philosophical perspective, he observes that language is flesh and culture is blood. From a communicative point of view, he believes that communication is swimming; language is the swimming skill, and culture is water. Without language, communication would be restricted and without culture, communication would not be possible. Pragmatically speaking, he compares communication to transportation, in which language acts like the vehicle and culture is the traffic light. With the assistance of language, communication becomes easier and culture defines the rules which sometimes let us continue, but on other occasions may stop us. For these reasons, it is essential that the EFL instructor seek to afford the L2 (second language) student opportunities to become competent in understanding the foreign culture.

## **Intercultural Competences and Communicative Competence**

Intercultural competence can be defined as our ability to understand and function in other cultures. When affording students chances to understand the foreign culture, it is important to realise that much of culture is implicit and included in those deeper layers. In this regard, Saglam (2010) mentions the metaphor used by Selfridge and Sokolik which compares how much of culture is seen to an iceberg. A mere ten percent of culture is visible, and this includes behaviour and beliefs. Ninety percent of the iceberg is unseen as it is below water. Similarly, ninety percent of culture is not immediately noticed. Saglam describes this invisible or out-of-awareness part as “deep culture.” This type of culture could be learned by imitating models and some of the examples of this type of culture include non-verbal patterns such as gestures, facial expressions and eye contact. She also notes that this deeper culture includes social expressions regarding degrees of cleanliness, tardiness and physical distance.

As far as the differing levels of competence in a foreign language are concerned, the goal of communicative competence is the primary one that must be achieved in the EFL classroom. Communicative competence is defined by Canale and Swain, quoted in Hostos (2014) as “a synthesis of an underlying system of knowledge and skill needed for communication.” (p. 10) In

other words, to communicate effectively when using English as a foreign language, students must have communicative competence, and to do this, they must manage four sub competences. These four subcategories from Canale and Swain's work are outlined by Brown (2014) as follows:

### **1. Grammatical competence**

The ability associated with mastering the linguistic code of a language.

### **2. Discourse competence**

This is the ability that involves connecting short words and phrases in order to make meaningful sentences. This includes everything from written texts to spoken dialogues.

### **3. Sociolinguistic competence**

This is the competence to follow sociocultural rules of language. This involves knowing when it is appropriate to use language.

### **4. Strategic Competence**

This is the ability to use verbal and non-verbal communicative techniques to compensate for breakdowns in communication or insufficient competence. This includes the ability to sustain communication through paraphrase, circumlocution, repetition, avoidance and guessing. (p. 208)

Brown adds that the final sub category, strategic competence, may be defined as the way we manipulate language to meet communicative goals. A talented public speaker possesses and uses a sophisticated strategic competence. A salesperson utilises certain strategies of communication to make a product attractive to the potential customer.

While all the above categories may be said to be necessary to achieve intercultural competence, aspects such as humour may be difficult to grasp even for the advanced learner. As a foreigner learning Japanese while living in Japan, I personally found rakugo, the Japanese comic storytelling art, especially useful to understand the subtleties of humour in the Japanese language. However, I must admit that it is sometimes difficult to convey to intermediate EFL students the meaning of English jokes which use sarcasm, irony and puns on words. When trying to explain the meaning in such humour one must take into consideration that what may be funny in one culture may not be necessarily funny in another.

## **Challenges Encountered when Teaching Culture**

One of the reasons why culture is often neglected in the classroom may be because teachers feel that dealing with the cultural aspects of the language may be time-consuming. In the compulsory English classes that I teach to first year students in the Department of World Languages and Cultures or the Department of History and Cultural Properties, for example, I have recently been using the *Smart Choice* textbook series from Oxford University Press. This series is essentially focused on improving learners' grasp of the four skills ; speaking, listening, reading and writing. The books do introduce different aspects of foreign cultures, although those cultural anecdotes

are not always from English speaking countries. Furthermore, the principal goal of these classes is to review English learnt in junior high school or high school, and then improve it, so teaching culture is not the principal focus.

Another reason why teachers tend to neglect the teaching of culture is that it involves dealing with student attitudes (Saglam, 2010). Many of the students understand and interpret culture within their own perspective of their native culture. Due to this, when there is something that they do not understand they consider it strange. Archer, quoted in Saglam (2010), calls this a ‘culture bump,’ which means an individual from one culture finds himself/herself in a very different or an uncomfortable situation when interacting with people from other cultures. (p. 24) This happens when people get a completely different response from a certain type of behaviour, which is totally different to what they are accustomed to. For example, in Asian cultures modesty is a very important concept. When people compliment each other, the person who is being complimented should not accept the compliment to show his modesty.

I have experienced several episodes of this “culture bump” during my time spent living in Japan. I considered it polite to exchange greetings with other staff at my workplace, so I consciously made an effort to say *ohayo gozaimasu*, the Japanese morning greeting, even to staff members with whom I didn’t have any direct contact with in everyday work situations. Upon uttering the morning greeting I was a little offended when my greeting was sometimes not returned verbally but with a mere nod. Later I realised that it was actually not uncommon for many Japanese people to greet not with words, but by simply nodding. I suppose this custom is not dissimilar to the concept in English societies where someone would not wait for a response to “Hi”, “Hello”, or “How’s it going?” Henceforth I found myself needing to find strategic competence to adapt to my new working environment by waiting for the other person to greet firstly.

Another possible difficulty when introducing culture in the EFL classroom includes teachers not having significant knowledge or skills to teach the cultural content. Furthermore, the teacher may fear that if too much focus is put on the cultural aspect, then the linguistic content will not be covered.

The hidden dangers of stereotyping while talking about cultures may also be a reason why teachers prefer not to cover cultural issues, especially in classes with students of mixed nationalities. Kumaravadivelu, quoted in Saglam (2010), argues the dangers of stereotyping stating that the teaching English as a Second Language (TESOL) profession is not free from cultural stereotypes and that there is the harmful homogenisation of people coming from China, Japan, Vietnam, and Korea, who are thrown into a single basket by being labelled as Asian. He also states that there exist three common stereotypes regarding Asians : a) They are obedient to authority, b) lack critical thinking skills, and c) do not participate in classroom activities.

Brown (2014) introduces the following joke as an example of European stereotypes.

HEAVEN is where the police are British, the cooks French, the mechanics German, the lovers Italian, and it’s all organized by the Swiss. HELL is where the cooks are British, the mechanics French, the lovers Swiss, the police German, and it’s all organized by the

Italians. (p.178)

A stereotype assigns group characteristics to individuals purely on the basis of their cultural membership. A stereotype is almost always inaccurate for describing an individual person in a culture, simply because of the dynamic, contextualised nature of culture. To judge a single member of a culture by overall traits of the culture is both to prejudge and to misjudge that person. In other words, all should not be painted with the same brush since everyone is individual in their own right. To quote the proverb : Don't judge a book by its cover.

Considering the above reasons for finding culture difficult to instruct, all teachers need to take care when deciding carefully how the cultural material is designed and organised in the classroom.

## **How to Incorporate Culture in the Curriculum**

### **The Comparative Approach-Personal Experience**

Firstly, in very broad terms, the different approaches to the teaching of culture can be divided into two: those which focus only (or mostly) on the culture of the country whose language is studied (the mono-cultural approach) and those which are based on comparing learners' own and the other culture (the comparative approach). I am currently responsible for instructing classes entitled Comparative Culture Studies to intermediate level English majors in their second year of study. Due to the title of the course, in my classes we generally use the comparative approach and I would like to introduce some of the textbooks I have used to date and their format.

#### *Spotlight on America and Japan* (Nan'un-do)

This textbook adopts the thematic approach to the teaching of culture by covering a different theme in each lesson which is compared, contrasted and discussed. Grammar, vocabulary, listening and reading activities are included. Some of the most popular themes among students include ; Cherry Blossoms, Sports, Anime in the USA and A Buddhist Christmas? Each unit begins with an essay on the topic and I usually then give students some original discussion questions so that discussion could take place about the differences between their own customs and what was mentioned in the essay.

#### *Pete and Kate: Life in Britain and Japan* (Nan'un-do)

This comparative textbook looks at the daily lives, customs and habits of young people living and travelling in the United Kingdom and Japan. While it is to a large extent mono-cultural as it is mostly based in the United Kingdom, it covers themes such as common sense, honour, humour, education, working and honesty. Students can take a glimpse at the daily lives of the two British main characters. The book follows the story of both characters throughout the book and students are given the opportunity to compare their lives, values and customs with those of the central characters.

#### *English in 30 Seconds: Award-Winning TV Commercials from Cannes Lions* (Nan'un-do)

As one can guess from the title, this textbook is based on popular award-winning TV commercials

from several English-speaking countries. One of the principal reasons for choosing this book was that it involved using audio-visual material in the classroom. Students read an essay on the topic, then complete vocabulary, watching and listening activities while watching each unit's commercials. By understanding the message in the commercial it is hoped that some level of intercultural competence can be obtained. However, I find this textbook to be the most difficult the three as commercials in general need a certain level of sociolinguistic competence to be fully understood.

### **Give students a chance to understand deep culture**

Teachers need to design cultural activities to make their learners see the invisible elements of the foreign culture. According to Kramersch, quoted in Saglam (2010), "cross-cultural communication cannot be achieved if we present students only the cultural facts". She further argues that the superficiality of the surface culture can be avoided by making learners interpret the cultural facts. Allowing students interpret these cultural norms presented in textbooks through role play, simulations in small groups or pairs would help students to explore the underlying attitudes, beliefs, and values of a society. By doing so, students would be able to see the invisible "deep" culture. (Saglam, 2010, p. 12)

### **Know one's own culture, as well as the foreign culture**

Since language and culture come hand in hand, when a person masters a foreign language, s/he has unavoidably acquired a foreign culture. If we accept that culture has a great influence on the way we run our daily lives, Johnson and Rinvoluceri (2014) list the following four ways in which we can assist our students :

- to become more aware of their target-culture norms and behaviours ;
- to recognise and understand more about other cultural beliefs and norms ;
- to look a little beyond cultural stereotypes and develop more empathy towards other cultures ;
- in doing this, to develop a much more profound awareness of their home culture. (p. 16)

Other researchers such as Saglam (2010) stress the need for creating a "neutral space" from which students can not only view their own culture but also view their own culture. She goes on to say:

In other words, the cultural information that is provided in the ESL classroom should give students a chance to observe their own cultures and the culture explored in the classroom without making any judgements and placing any value distinctions. (p.57)



## **More activities than exercises**

Several researchers stress the importance of using more activities than exercises to improve students' intercultural understanding. Exercises usually ask students to answer questions based on facts. Activities, on the other hand, allow students to assume the role of scientists who are questioning, solving a problem, analysing a conflicting situation, collecting data, and comparing and contrasting the facts. (Saglam, 2010) Saglam goes on to say that the role of a cultural activity should be engaging the students to take an active role in the classroom practices, in which students become the ultimate doers of the actions and learn not to expect everything to be controlled by their teachers. By giving oral presentations about their cultures, carrying out a survey or a mini ethnographic study, interviewing native speakers or acting out a role in a simulation, students can be given an active role. As a result, they will gradually be able to uncover the hidden norms underlying the target culture.

In a somewhat similar fashion, Brown lists a checklist that illustrates how lessons and activities may be generated, shaped, and revised according to principles of intercultural language learning. Let me list just a few which I consider relevant for my students :

- Does the activity value the customs and belief systems that are presumed to be part of the culture(s) of the students?
- Does the activity refrain from promoting demeaning stereotypes of any culture, including the culture(s) of your students?
- Does the activity refrain from any devaluing of the students' native language(s)?
- Does the activity in some way draw on the rich background experiences of the students in their own culture, as well as their experiences in other cultures?
- Where possible, does the activity promote critical intercultural thinking and awareness, helping students to appreciate heritages and values different from their own? (Brown, 2014, p. 200)

## **Techniques and Materials**

The three textbooks mentioned above are what are known as authentic materials, which means audio, visual or printed materials that are written specifically for the native speakers of the language. In my specific case, that language is Japanese. Other materials that could be used to teach culture could include ; proverbs, films, literature, inviting native speakers to classes, using audio-visual and/or computer technology. Twenty-first century students are becoming more technologically-conscious and the English as a Foreign Language classroom instructor may need to take more advantage of this sooner rather than later.

## **Conclusion**

When a student studies language, it means that he/she simultaneously studies culture. Intercultural competence becomes necessary in order to be able to understand and carry out

normal daily activities in other cultures. However, intercultural competence is not always easily achieved so it the duty of the English as a Foreign Language instructor to be aware of the difficulties involved when designing activities for the classroom. For the teacher to prepare students for success in a globally interconnected world, intercultural competence must form some part of the foreign language curriculum. This is especially true for those who major in English or wish to use the English language in some way during their future careers.

As an instructor of intermediate Japanese learners of English, I consider it essential to find educational material that is suitable to students' needs. However, while attempting to assist students to achieve intercultural competence it is important for the instructor to 1) respect the students' culture(s), 2) give students a chance to analyse both their own culture as well as the foreign culture, and 3) strive to design activities that can increase understanding of other cultures. One must admit that not all activities mentioned may be viable for intermediate learners of English, but it is hoped that by achieving some form of intercultural competence, they can experience how to appropriately use language to build relationships and understandings with people from differing cultures. They can then examine their own values, ideas and customs from a new perspective and look at themselves and at the world in general with an open mind.

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