

“You are” — “We are”: A Tale of Two Cultures

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Introduction

Awareness of the language-culture connection and its importance within the foreign and second language context has grown out of the vast body of work done by sociolinguists, social psychologists, educators and language teachers during the last forty years. For the early researchers in sociolinguistics (Gumperz, 1964; Fishman, 1965; and Trudgill, 1974) it was imperative that all models of language take into consideration communicative conduct and social life; a position made explicit by Hymes (1974) who affirmed that “Within the developmental matrix in which knowledge of the sentences of a language is acquired, children also acquire knowledge of a set of ways in which the sentences are used. From finite experience of speech acts and their interdependence with sociocultural features, they develop a general theory of the speaking appropriate in their community,” (in Pride & Holmes, 1972; p. 279). Some years later, this proposition would be reconfirmed by Bloome & Egan-Robertson (1993) who postulated that “It is through language that social relationships come into being (e.g., parent-son/daughter, teacher-student), social acts are created, conducted, organized (e.g., marriage, graduation, litigation, education), and social groups are formed (e.g., through names such as *class*, *team*, *family*, and through the use of lexicons, registers, and dialects associated with class, ethnicity, and gender)” (p. 309). Furthermore, according to these same authors, “People textualize experience and the world in which they live, making those phenomena part of a language system.” (p. 311)

Other authors such as Savignon (1983), Robinson (1985), Snow & Shapira (1985), Omaggio (1986), and Wright (1987), to name but a few, were also of the opinion that culture played an important role in both the teaching and learning of foreign languages, because, as McGroarty & Galvan (in Celce-Murcia, 1985, p. 82) pointed out, “culture shapes one’s views of language and education in profound ways, and these views affect expectations regarding the nature of language teaching and learning in the classroom.” During this same period of time, the use of the literary text as a vehicle for teaching culture in the foreign or second language program was also attested to by many experts, among them Carter & Long (1986), McKay (1986), and Stem (1987). For these authors, literature constituted an ideal media for learning about the values and customs of the target culture which, in turn, would lead to a greater degree of tolerance for cultural differences for both

the students and the teacher. This relationship was described by Stem who wrote: “Literature can help students understand, empathize with and vicariously participate in the target culture. Just as a language is both reflective of and determined by its speakers’ culture, so too is its literature. In fact, language, literature and culture are integrally related.” (p. 47)

In the decade that followed, the presence of cultural values and artifacts in both literary and expository texts and their effects upon the foreign or second language teaching-learning process was of interest to authors such as Brown (1990), Swaffar, Arens & Byrnes (1991), Mejia, Xiao, & Pasternak (1992), and Murphy (1994), while Field & Aebersold (1990) addressed the issue of teaching English as a second language to immigrant students in the United States, commenting upon the difficulties encountered by the person who finds him or herself in a situation which obliges him or her to deal with the parent culture and the culture of the dominant society simultaneously. In a similar vein, both Hones (1992) and Hugh (1992) suggested pedagogical activities for bridging the gap between the ESL students and the community in which they live, and Tang (1993) offered a model for overcoming the difficulties encountered in the teaching of English as a second language in a multicultural setting. Cross-cultural interaction was also referred to by Winer & Steffensen (1992) in relation to EFL/ESL teacher-training programs, and, from the social-psychological perspective, Paige (1990) described the importance of cross-cultural awareness in the fields of counseling and orientation, particularly with regard to international students in the United States who, according to this same author, accounted for 6% of the entire university population in the country between 1987 and 1988. This situation prompted a number of specialists in counseling and orientation (Saltzman, 1986; Westwood, Lawrence, & McBlane, 1986; Bhawuk, 1990; Cushner, 1990) among others, to examine cross-cultural issues within the context of higher education and, subsequently, in multicultural corporate settings.

The previously cited publications are but a small sample of the work being done in the field and, according to Tomalin & Stempleski (1993) the study of cross-cultural interaction with regard to foreign and second language teaching and learning has increased significantly during the last few years and will probably continue to do so during what remains of the century. They suggest that this trend is probably the result of both linguistic and socio-economic factors, citing as possible reasons the rise in economic importance of the Pacific Rim countries, the influence of increased immigration on curricula, the study of pragmatics and, the study of non-verbal communication. Whatever the reason for this increase in interest, it seems evident that language and culture are intimately related and this connection cannot be ignored in the ESL/EFL setting.

Typically, the language-culture relationship is dealt with in the so-called "culture courses" that are frequently included in university-level EFL programs. These courses are designed to provide the student with an understanding of specific cultural elements which he or she is likely to encounter when studying in an English-speaking country, while simultaneously increasing his or her communicative competence through situationally-based activities in the classroom. Unfortunately, this is often a one-way process in which the student's own culture is often overlooked or played down, reducing the possibility of subsequent positive experiences in cross-cultural encounters. As Saltzman (in Paige, 1986) has pointed out, people who are effective in their interactions with others from different cultural backgrounds are those who can appreciate and value both the host culture as well as their own. Furthermore, according to Saltzman, "they have positive sentiments toward their own heritage and feel no need for either condemnation or uncritical acceptance of the new culture." (p. 251)

The Activity

"You are" - "We are" : *A Tale of Two Cultures*, which is a variation and extension of Tomalin & Stempleski's "Ten Word Game" (1993; p. 32), is intended to increase the students' understanding of elements of the target culture by increasing their understanding about their own culture. At the same time, the activity attempts to demonstrate how one's cultural background influences many of one's reactions to culturally specific stimuli and how it effects one's behavior in particular social situations. Rather than teach *about* culture, the activity facilitates *cultural awareness* by involving the student in a dynamic process which allows them to analyze the cultural patterns of both groups, thus promoting an exchange of ideas and opinions about both cultures in a non-threatening environment. Ideal for moderate size classes of 20 to 30 upper-intermediate to advanced level, university students, the activity, when used at the beginning of the course, establishes a basis for a more insightful analysis of each of the subsequent topics contemplated in the syllabus. It also contributes toward more meaningful verbal interaction between students and between the students and the teacher, and offers ample opportunities for developing listening, speaking, and writing skills in English. In addition, it sets the stage for introducing the topic of "stereotypes" and how they function in cross-cultural interactions. Depending on the number of students, three 50-minute class sessions are usually sufficient to complete the work, and apart from a blackboard, chalk, paper, and pencils, no other special materials are required. Although culturally-related reading materials are not referred to, it is assumed that reading is an integral part of the course and that many of the opinions expressed by the students during the realization of the activity will have been triggered by information encountered in the texts read outside of class.

Procedure

First Class Period

Forming the groups: Divide the class into two groups of ten to fifteen students each. Tell the members of one group to pretend to be natives of the country where English is spoken. Instruct the members of the other group to assume their own cultural identity. If there are students in the class who have lived or traveled extensively in an English-speaking country they should be included in the group that will assume the identity of the target country (e.g., the U.S., U.K., Canada, Australia). The desks of each group should be arranged in a circle to facilitate communication between members.

Providing the word list: Next write from ten to fifteen words on the board that are normally associated with values, and social roles, situations and/or conditions. Some typical lexical items are: *money, win, mother, loose, privacy, work, success, marriage, the elderly, fairness, freedom, youth, and failure*. The number of words will depend on the size of the groups and the amount of time that can be devoted to the activity, although there should be at least one word per group member. If the teacher has access to a copier, this word list may also be photocopied and handed out to each of the groups

Making up the story: (Approximately 20-30 minutes): Tell students in each group to make up a story using each of the words in the list in a sentence. One student should be nominated by the other members of the group to write the story which will be made up of each of the sentences put forth by the other members. To begin the story, one member selects any word from the list and uses it in a sentence. The next student must select another word from the list and use it in the following sentence. This process is repeated until all of the words have been used and all of the members of the group have had an opportunity to contribute a sentence. Remind the students that the story should be told from the perspective of the national group that is being represented (e.g., American-Venezuelan, Canadian-Chinese, British-Pakistani). Also remind the students that each of the sentences should be logically related to the previous one. The students may consult with one another with regard to customs, national characteristics, the meaning of specific words, and grammatical points, and they may also change the form of the word (e.g., verb tenses or pluralization). Circulate in the classroom in order to clarify points and answer questions. Encourage students to be spontaneous and creative in their responses while composing the story. Assure them that they will not be penalized for mistakes in grammar or spelling. When each group has finished writing down their story, collect them and save them for the next class period.

Second Class Period

Reading the story and note taking: (Approximately 15-25 minutes): At the beginning of the class period tell students to arrange their desks in two semi-circles in order to allow both “national” groups to face each other. Once the members of each “national” group are seated, return their written versions of the story. Give the students a few minutes to re-read the story and to make any last minute corrections. (The teacher may select the group to read first or flip a coin to see which group will go first). Explain that the stories will be read twice and that the written version should be passed from student to student in order for each pupil to have an opportunity to participate in the reading. Instruct each member of the other group (listeners) to note down any aspects of the story which they feel reflect values and behavior that typify the culture of the “story-tellers.” Sometimes it is necessary to read the story a third time to facilitate the note-taking. This same process is then repeated with the second group who read their story while the members of the other group take notes. The correction of pronunciation during the second or third reading of the story is left to the discretion of the teacher who may prefer to promote spontaneity rather than focus on language skills for the moment.

“You are” - How others see us: (Approximately 15-25 minutes): After each of the stories has been presented and the students have written down their notes, a few minutes should be allowed for the students to analyze those characteristics that they felt exemplified the cultural standpoint of the opposite group. Next, tell the students to write a single statement about the other cultural group. The statement must begin with the “you are,” and should reflect a specific characteristic that appeared in their notes. Some examples of this kind of statement are “You are more interested in money than in people,” “You are dependent upon your mother,” “You are centered on winning no matter what,” “You are pleasant to strangers,” or “You are not interested in sharing things with others,” etc. It is important to explain to the students that they should not incorporate value judgments (good-bad-right-wrong) in their statements. When each of the members of each group has prepared his or her statement, each group takes turns in reading their descriptions to the other group, explaining exactly which aspects in the story caused them to formulate their opinion. Once again, tell the students to take notes on the opinions of the members of the opposite group. Collect the notes and opinion statements and give them back at the beginning of the next class session. The opinion statements may be corrected and graded if the teacher chooses to do so.

Third Class Period

“We are” - How we see ourselves: (Approximately 45 minutes): Return the notes and opinion statements to the students at the beginning of the class period. Tell the students to write down what they consider to be a typical characteristic of their own culture (or the

one they are portraying) and formulate opinion statements beginning with the words “we are” (e.g., “We are hard-working,” “We are thrifty,” “We are not athletic,” “We are hospitable,” etc.). Each group then reads these opinions to the other, followed by a discussion in which members of one group can ask members of the other why certain behaviors or ideas were perceived as typical of the particular culture or why characteristics or ideas were not mentioned.

“A Tale of Two Cultures” (Written homework assignment): Tell the students to write a comparative description of each of the cultures involved, pointing out important similarities and differences. The title of the essay should be “A Tale of Two Cultures,” and should be based on the student’s interpretation of the “You are” - “We are” statements. The length of the essay and the grading criteria should be determined by the teacher, although most upper-intermediate or advanced level students are capable of producing a one to three page essay. A second homework assignment, consisting of a prediction of individual and/or group behavior in specific situations by members of each of the cultural groups based on the characteristics discussed in class, can also be derived from the activity. An appropriate title for this second essay could be “You will” - “We will.” Another possible written assignment could deal with how people *should* behave with different members of society (peers, teachers, hosts, bosses, children, the elderly, salespeople, etc.) in specific settings such as work, school, grocery shopping, attending sports events, dating or dining out in each of the two cultures. The title for this essay could be “You should” - “We should.”

Discussion

With regard to specific language skills, the activity has proven to be an asset in developing listening, oral production, and written production since all are practiced throughout the process. A number of language functions such as describing people, habits, and behaviors, expressing opinions, asking for more exact information, clarifying, criticizing, responding to criticism and, contrasting and comparing, are present in the different stages of the activity, which means that the students are given plenty of opportunities for using appropriate language. Other language functions such as predicting and explaining cause-effect relationships are also realized in the written homework assignments. This means that the activity can be easily incorporated into programs based on the communicative approach. It is also important to mention that both the oral and written components of the activity contribute towards increasing vocabulary.

Because the students work together in small groups, exchange and discuss information with the intention of forming a more complete picture of the situation, and interpret the information from the perspective of both cultures, the activity is based on the

principles of cooperative learning recommended by Tomalin & Stempleski (1993) for teaching culture in the ESL/EFL setting. Furthermore, classroom experience has demonstrated that the activity also stimulates creativity and spontaneity and serves as an excellent vehicle for integrating both cultural and linguistic knowledge.

Finally, in relation to cultural awareness, the possibility of examining the target culture from the perspective of one's own culture allows the student to find value in both, thus enhancing his or her chances of success in his or her future educational and/or professional environment while, at the same time, reducing his or her chances of entering into cross-cultural conflicts. As Smith and Bond (1993), have pointed out, a little cultural knowledge would go a long way towards improving the outcome of many cross-cultural encounters. Hopefully, it would also contribute towards a greater *awareness of* and a greater *tolerance for* diversity, and promote greater *understanding* between individuals and nations.

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