
Beyond Communicative Competence: Teaching Culture in ESL

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It is paradoxical that communicative competence is sometimes treated as part of language rather than as social interaction. Strictly speaking, just as language is part of culture, so communicative competence is part of cultural competence. Even though communicative competence is often described in such purely cultural terms as sociolinguistic appropriateness (Hymes 1974) or social etiquette (Paulston & Bruder of 1976; Saville-Troike 1976), the role of culture in ESL remains largely unexplored, and certainly under-developed. A conceptual framework for incorporating culture into the ESL curriculum is offered below, along with several suggestions for modifying the curriculum to include culture.

Communicative Competence as Cultural Competence

The relationship between culture and behavior is so deep and so pervasive that in everyday life it is taken for granted that "this is the way things are." To the anthropologist, however,

... there can be no such thing as natural behavior. Every kind of action carries the imprint of learning, from feeding to washing, from repose to movement ... (Mauss, cited in M. Douglas 1973:93)

This applies above all to language and communication. But while language is used for communication, and in communication, it is not the case that language alone is communication. In fact, the role of language in communication is considered to be less important than the nonlinguistic competent, which includes use of space, gesture, posture, touch, facial expression, gaze, odor, bodily decoration, dress, artifacts, and consumer goods (see M. Douglas 1978: 298; Montagu & Matson 1979:xii; Widdowson 1978:73; Wolfgang 1979:171).

The complexity of everyday communication is significant:

We alternate "channels" and mix sensory effects like expert technicians; we execute delicate bodily maneuvers and choreograph our gestures with the rhythmic grace of dancers; we change roles, put on and take off masks, and stage our continuous performances like the most gifted of actors (Montagu & Matson 1979:xi).

This, the communicative competence of the native member of a group or society, is cultural competence. Much richness is lost in taking a "contrastive Emily Post approach" (Paulston & Bruder 1979:59) to communicative competence in ESL.

Language as Social Action

Dewey saw language as “fundamentally and primarily a social instrument” (cited in Seelye 1974:13); Malinowski considered it “a mode of action, and not an instrument of reflection” (cited in Hudson 1980:109). This notion may be unfamiliar to those whose primary concern is with language in classroom settings; but in everyday life, as Schutz (1972:130) observed, communication is for some purpose. This view is shared by Stevick, who defines language as “purposeful behavior between the same people” (1976:128).

Actually, this view is anything but esoteric. People want to do things, there are established ways of doing most of them, and language plays a major part in many cases—as everyone knows. The point is that, regardless of whether we also believe that “doing things” is language’s most important function, the basic truths that have shaped our thinking about communicative competence—language is used in appropriate ways, and for communication—must be supplemented. Communicative competence is “social competence” (Argyle 1979:154), or “interactional competence” (Speier 1973:59).

Language and Social Reality

Much of our reality is created through language use (see Berger & Luckmann 1966; Edie 1976). This is not part of “what everybody knows”—to the contrary, the linguistic (i.e., man-made) basis of social reality goes virtually unnoticed. “Social categories are seen as part of the outside world, along with physical surroundings, artifacts, beliefs, etc.” (Gumperz 1971a:222). This relationship between language and society is not only fundamental (see Fishman 1977:57) but truly interactive:

Language is both the principal means whereby individuals externalize themselves into the objectifications that make up society and the means whereby society talks back to these individuals shaping them to its intentions (Lemert 1979:154).

This aspect of language, too, has significant implications.

Deviance, both as studied by sociologists (see, for example, Scott & Lyman 1970) and as determined in formal proceedings, is an excellent example of the linguistic creation of reality. How does one demonstrate an attribute such as character, or a condition such as delinquency, other than with words? This most fundamental aspect of language use is seldom addressed in ESL teaching.

Language also preserves what is, as Berger and Luckmann (1966:65) note: “The edifice of legitimation is built upon language and uses language as its principal instrumentality.” One example of this is the social inequality of the sexes, which is seen as perpetuated by language structure (Wilden 1980:76-78) and usage patterns (Lakoff 1978:51-64).

Since language is always about something, rather than nothing, even the language produced by the ESL teacher and incorporated in the materials creates or reinforces some social reality. That relatively little attention is paid to whose reality that is, and what its characteristics are, and what the effects are, is not the point here. What is relevant for communicative competence in ESL is that, as Brittan (1973:83) put it, "Communication is more than an exercise in information; it assumes a role which is equivalent, if not identical, to other sociological categories, such as structure and culture."

Culture in the Classroom

Culture means different things to different people. With respect to learning a second culture, the most useful approach is from the subjective viewpoint:

. . . culture consists of whatever it is one has to know or believe in order to operate in a manner acceptable to its members (Goodenough, cited in Hudson 1980:83).

The structure of meaning in culture, and the ability of members to become culturally competent, is sometimes likened to that of language:

. . . *all* the various non-verbal dimensions of culture . . . are organized in patterned sets so as to incorporate coded information in a manner analogous to the sounds and words and sentences of a natural language (Leach 1976:10, emphasis in the original).

. . . culture plays a role in communication which is somewhat similar to the role of syntactic knowledge in the decoding of referential meanings (Gumperz 1971b:330, also see Cicourel 1974).

And just as the ESL teacher's speech behavior is sociolinguistically appropriate, his or her other behavior is culturally appropriate. Treating male and female students alike, asking direct questions, behaving informally in class—this is (Western) culture. In this sense, the presence of culture in every classroom is quite unavoidable.

What can, and should, be done is to recognize the inseparability of language and culture, and deal actively with culture in ESL. The basic recommendation, then, is to teach culture, rather than leave it to be acquired.

Teaching Culture in ESL

Teaching about American society is likely to be no more productive than teaching about English. Thus, if culture is what individuals know and believe, general social science description is of limited value. Another popular approach to culture is through literature, but again there is a limitation.

The quarrel is not with the value of literature or art as a means to illustrate how the foreign people live, but rather with the restrictive inroad fiction offers as the major source of information. Since many language teachers

feel uncomfortable dealing with concepts and data of the social sciences, they tend to rely too heavily on literature to teach culture. Consequently, the common dual descriptor “literature and culture” has itself become suspect: It too often means a little culture and a lot of literature (Seelye 1974:15).

At the same time, some books specifically designed for teaching culture exhibit what J. Douglas (1970:5) calls “the dichotomizing of the social world into morally disjunct categories—right side of the tracks versus wrong side of the tracks” (emphasis in the original):

. . . the United States is, in fact, markedly segmented into neighborhoods, residential areas, and ghettos; right and wrong sides of town (Lanier 1978:27).

“Used to be a real good, solid, middle-class neighborhood. But it’s changing . . .” (Johnson 1979:3).

Fortunately, there is an excellent cross-cultural introduction to American values and beliefs, *American Cultural Patterns* (Stewart 1972), which does treat culture in subjective terms and could be used as a reference guide in the type of approach suggested here.

The basic resource, for now, must be the teacher. Though even graduate-level programs in TESL do not ordinarily include culture courses (Ochsner 1980), the teacher often is in a position to know what the student’s particular social and cultural needs will be; and most ESL teachers have an adequate background in, say, American culture by virtue of being native members of the culture.

According to the conceptual framework offered above, ESL is always ESP, even if the “special purpose” is as broad as coping with a new sociocultural environment. Learning about one’s world is an ongoing process, of course, for natives as well as for newcomers. This amounts to a spiral curriculum, where key items are covered more than once, at ever-higher levels of competence. Topics sometimes taught in ESL include “survival skills”; norms and values associated with higher education (EAP); informal topics such as jokes and insults; and, of course, basic aspects of linguistic communication (“communicative competence”). What is missing generally are the three basic aspects of real-life language use discussed earlier: the full range of non-verbal communication; ways of doing things with language (e.g., justifying one’s behavior); and the creation of social reality (e.g., establish a good reputation in school or community). These language use topics, along with basic social and cultural data (both subjective and objective), constitute the cultural component.

All types of language-learning activities, for students at all levels of English fluency, can be oriented to culture. For more advanced students, contact activities in

the community, which form a part of some ESL curricula, offer obvious opportunities for cultural studies. What do you (have to) say when returning unsatisfactory merchandise? How do you describe your own status in the most favorable or respectable way? What does long hair on men mean?

In-class activities sometimes can be organized around statuses and roles that are socioculturally significant to the students. For instance, nouns and verbs, and direct objects can be studied together as they occur in real life—e.g., "counselor": offers advice, approves courses, maintains records; "policeman": gives directions, arrests law-breakers, directs traffic; "student": attends classes, does homework, participates socially. Such a method has three important characteristics: grammar and syntax can be treated in ordinary ways; vocabulary is a direct function of actual student need; and culture is built-in. In principle, this method can be used at all levels.

Another method of potentially broad application is where students make attributions of meaning. In one sense, this is the opposite of role-playing. In role-playing, speaker-actors start with some subjective conception or meaning which they try to act out or display appropriately, while in the attribution method of culture teaching, hearer-viewers are presented with some display or performance which they try to understand or explain. Thus, where role-playing tends to be production-oriented, the attribution method emphasizes receptive skills.

The teaching process begins with some initial cultural input from the teacher or, in written versions called culture assimilators (see, for example, Brislin 1981:101-105), the materials themselves. The students then apply the general cultural input to a number of specific situations seeking to make culturally accurate attributions as to subjective meaning. In use, this method may appear indistinguishable from ordinary elicitation of language using visual or written stimuli. The critical difference can be seen in the fact that the teacher asks, for example, not "What is the man doing?" but "Why is the man doing that?" or "What is the man thinking?" A correct response to the question represents an attribution based on the initial input, assuming that the situation or behavior portrayed is not plainly obvious to members of the student's culture. Even without culture assimilators or other formal materials, teachers can adopt the subjective approach to culture that is at the heart of this method.

Student reaction to cultural material may provide a point of departure for follow-up activities involving cross-cultural comparisons or other student-generated communication (e.g., imitating, modeling, or exaggerating). Before introducing new methods of teaching culture, it would be advisable to confront the practical aspects, e.g., establish that students do not object to learning culture; survey students' cultural backgrounds to avoid uncomfortable situations; and, of course, decide how much culture to attempt to include. It makes sense, too, to start the culture teaching

with the norms and values of the language-learning situation itself—e.g., values: punctuality, individual responsibility, equality, informality, directness; norms: arrive on time, do not give or accept (unauthorized) assistance, treat all classmates the same, address classmates by first names, express personal ideas and feelings.

The suggestions offered above are only examples of incorporating a cultural orientation. Developing a conscious awareness of one's own culture is a satisfying undertaking in its own right, and teachers who wish to help others understand their culture will surely develop many better methods and techniques. What is important at this point is to realize that the need, and the challenge, are there.

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