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## L2 Cultural Negotiation in English as a Lingua Franca

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### Introduction

L2 cultural negotiation is becoming one of the increasingly important concepts in teaching English to speakers of other languages. In particular, recent thoughts on the emergence of English as a lingua franca (e.g., Ammon, 2007; Baker, 2009; Crystal, 1997; Jenkins, 2006; Park & Wee, 2012) and its role as a language that allows speakers of other languages negotiate meaning over artifacts illuminate the need for a new understanding of how this process works. While it has been traditionally assumed in our community that the native speaker is a target norm when it comes to interpretation of cultural phenomena (i.e., the student either understands or does not understand), this decidedly colonial model is no longer appropriate in a world where ethnic, national, and other socio-cultural boundaries are becoming increasingly blurred (Auge, 2000). In this open coded data study, this simplistic model in which only one norm is possible is questioned and interpretations which enhance our understanding of how meaning is constructed by non-native English speakers who orient themselves toward this world of English as a lingua franca are explored.

Of particular interest here is the idea that reading comprehension, as an important part of the process of meaning construction, can be approached from a different angle in ESL pedagogy. Specifically, if we are to accept that lingua francas are not simply a manifestation of the norm which gravitates toward the native speaker and instead exemplify something that allows non-native English speakers to communicate their thoughts, ideas, and feelings in a manner that is meaningful even if they do not match the target norm, then English language learners' expression of these is a manifestation of personal linguaculture (Risager, 2008) that is not unlike what we see in their interlanguage. However, it can also be argued that this personal linguaculture does not have as its objective and ultimate aim the development of the native speaker norm; instead, the way personal linguaculture expresses itself through literacy shows the degree to which every human being is unique. From this perspective, this qualitative study is an attempt to cognize a wider array of changes in ESL pedagogy which are yet to come. While the many

questions which arise out of this new orientation toward a different world of English speakers cannot be answered immediately, the author seeks to problematize the idea of the target norm, especially as it is interpreted in the ESL classroom today, and to offer the audience an opportunity to peek into the world of L2 cultural negotiation from the point of view of cross-cultural hermeneutics.

### **Review of the Literature**

Teaching a second language means teaching cultural negotiation, whether directly or indirectly, and the ability to speak a second language also means at least being able to converse and work with people from cultures other than one's own – new cultural knowledge is translated into schema which is then used to interpret new cultural knowledge (Baddock, 1983; Hill, 1990; Guthrie & Guthrie, 1987; Kasper, 2000; Lapidus, 2008a, 2008b, 2010). Naturally, this can be interpreted as the idea that cultural schemata that are related to one's L1 cause what is not unlike L1 interference in the process of second language acquisition, i.e., the acquisition of the target norm is made harder by the fact that the learner is distracted by what he or she already knows based on his or her experience in his/her L1 culture. In turn, this makes it difficult for L2 learners to construct meaning that more closely resembles the target norm (McLaughlin, 1987; Trueba, 1987), which leads to misunderstanding and even damage to personal linguaculture – if the function of language is to help human beings understand each other, then the situation in which the meaning that is constructed in a dyad deviates significantly from the target norm results in a failure to communicate.

A brief look at today's most popular ESL textbooks reveals the presence in them of the idea that an English language learners' prior experience cannot be completely discarded; however, the question of cultural negotiation is approached from the old perspective which dictates that the target norm must be achieved by any means necessary. Therefore, the notion that English is, in fact, a lingua franca that carries with it not simply the ability to access a shared, common core of knowledge, but also the possibility of many target norms or even no norms in the traditional sense, does not necessarily find an application in the modern ESL textbook. Furthermore, the ESL texts that we use in the classroom tend to give our students an opportunity to look into the mysterious world of the native English speaker, and yet they do not always place the ESL learners' experience on the same level

as the importance of the acquisition of factual knowledge that pertains to the L2 culture. In turn, this essentialization of L2 culture, while it does make our job a little easier, does not answer the fundamental question as to what happens when non-native English speakers in the lingua franca paradigm encounter texts that are laden with what would traditionally be seen as cultural capital accessible only to those in the in-group.

### **Research questions**

In the process of reading a US-produced comic strip, how is meaning constructed by three randomly chosen, culturally and linguistically diverse ESL speakers who are graduate students and ESL teachers, and how is the meaning that is constructed influenced by the subjects' knowledge base?

## **Method**

### **Materials**

Recently, the presence of visual literacy materials (and visual narratives, such as comics, in particular) in the classroom has become more acceptable than it used to be (e.g., Brunk, 2006; Cary, 2004; Krashen & Ujjiie, 1996; Norton, 2001). While the study of the role visual narratives can play in the process of L2 cultural negotiation in the ESL classroom is an emergent field, the idea that they have potential as alternatives to verbal literacy, (e.g., as an empowerment tool, The New London Group, 1996) has been expressed in the literature since at least the early 1980s (Baddock, 1983; Hill, 1990; Norton, 2001). Though visual narratives have simultaneously been rejected and dismissed as texts that are not legitimate cultural literacy materials (e.g. Cary, 2004; Norton, 2001; Norton & Toohey, 2003; and others), ESL students express an intense affinity for visual narratives and embrace them as literacy materials (Cary, 2004; Hill, 1990; Kasper, 2000). It is posited that the humor and visuals can be understood as helping the learner interpret the meaning of the text in a new and exciting way despite, or perhaps due to, the culture which saturates much of what visual narratives tend to represent (Lapidus, 2010).

"Monty," a Sunday comic strip, was chosen because it used simple, easy to understand language while openly requiring American English cultural schemata

if used within the native-set “ideal” model. Interpretation, from the traditional point of view, would be complicated by humor, including mild sarcasm. In a strip that consists of six panels, Monty, the protagonist, is visited by an obese and balding entity identifying himself as a tooth fairy. The tooth fairy checks his records and sees that Monty has recently lost a filling. Monty, who has not lost a tooth since the age of eleven, is surprised to hear that he could have been rewarded for retaining the filling, which he has thrown away, and is then told that a filling is indeed worth 75 cents in mouthwash coupons. Visibly upset that the entity woke him up at 3:35am, he orders the tooth fairy to leave the room. On the way out, the tooth fairy informs Monty that wisdom teeth are worth ten thousand miles on a major US airline but fails to impress Monty and still must leave.

### **Participants and procedure**

All three participants were full-time graduate students in their twenties. Two participants were female (“Abby” and “Cindy”), and one was male (“Bob,” all names have been changed). The participants came from an island in the Pacific Ocean where English is taught as a foreign language (EFL), an island in the Pacific Ocean where it is taught as a second language (ESL), and a country in Northern Africa where it is taught as a foreign language. Two of them were raised in environments where English was taught as a foreign language, and one of the participants grew up in a bilingual environment where English was used in daily life. All three were fluent speakers of English as a lingua franca and employed as teachers of English, thus representing the imagined community of persons who specialize in teaching ESL/EFL (Kanno & Norton, 2003; Pavlenko, 2003).

Once the interview questionnaire was drafted (see Appendix), the participants were given a copy of the comic strip and five minutes to read it. Each participant was then interviewed by the researcher (“Interviewer”), and the interviews were recorded. Each interview was then carefully transcribed, and each transcript was studied and examined for answers to the research questions. Thematic categories were defined during the process of data analysis, which ultimately allowed the researcher to draw conclusions based on the interviews.

## Results

Three thematic categories were evident from the results of the interviews:

- 1) Interpretation of factual information (e.g., description of the characters);
- 2) Explanation (i.e., interpretation of the observed);
- 3) Stereotypes.

Two participants had no pre-existing knowledge of the Western concept “tooth fairy,” while one participant was told about the existence of tooth fairies as a child. For example:

ABBY: I never heard about a tooth fairy before I came here.

BOB: A lady that comes to give you money to replace your tooth when you lose a tooth. A tooth fairy is a lady who comes in and takes your tooth or takes your tooth and exchanges it for... For money.

All three had pre-existing knowledge of flying and the frequent flyer concept, shopping, and saving money through coupons, as well as other common schemata, such as having to close annoying pop-up windows when using the Internet, losing teeth, and seeking privacy:

ABBY: Normally offer money but here it's coupon and bonus, Sky Miles on Delta, which is not... (laughing)...

BOB: But this is like a pop-up ad, out of a computer.

ABBY: Actually, it's tooth fairy, they usually... In my country, we usually just throw the tooth and we hope for another and we hope for another beautiful one but here, they get money instead of it, which is mean that they are looking for money more than, you know, erm, what we call it, it's not something that's, you know, er, can be touched or (inaudible)... I, I forgot the word for it, but, er... It's not feeling and this, something that can be hold and touched, and you can pay for it, you know, things like that. I don't, I forgot the word for it.

All three were able to successfully describe the characters (e.g., the character's physical appearance), but the inferences made from the interaction between the characters varied. While interpretations of why Monty refused the tooth fairy's offer varied to a certain extent, all three participants cited economic reasons:

ABBY: Because... the character is a man and has wings.

INTERVIEWER: Uh-hm...

ABBY: His dress is like Roman.

CINDY: He was shouting to him...

INTERVIEWER: Uh-hm.

CINDY: He... He was pretty annoyed.

ABBY: (laughing) And bonus, which they usually don't get, and, you know, coupon that's just 75 cents, nothing, but they ran to it, and save (inaudible) nothing too.

BOB: You know, he may, he may be, you know, Monty might be suggesting that, that he does not give a damn, you know, about what the tooth fairy is offering. And especially, I think, eh... eh... Well, no, no, and I can't, I have to take that back because, because Monty is just dealing with the filling and not an actual tooth and, and, and I think it's also because the tooth fairy isn't someone who Monty might have expected.

BOB: Because of economic constraints and the lack of money, eh, like the tooth fairy here is offering coupons, eh, in replace of money, which may, you know, which may suggest, you know, just, just economic hardships.

Furthermore, according to the participants, Monty refused the offer because he was not an "arrogant," "naïve" Westerner (except Cindy), as he did not care about the perceived values of the target community; because the tooth fairy was annoying; because Monty was ashamed of losing his filling and then being confronted by an unexpected guest (a person of authority); and because Monty lost touch with his inner child upon reaching puberty and was deprived of his rights to imagination by his parents:

BOB: Erm, it can also be that he doesn't care, he does not care about this practice, and, and the filling the role of a... a... of... You know, parents may, some parents may not even be wanting, or, wanting to fill the lines, or allow children... Children to have some type of imagination, that a tooth fairy exists, and so, because, because this guy does not believe in the tooth...

Stereotypes resulting from the combination of the subjects' existing schemata and the new information acquired from the comic strip were then elicited. References to the perceived Western system of values, especially the view of the target L2 community as a commonwealth of business-minded independent individuals achieving puberty at a certain age, were made. Perceived materialism, tendency

to be self-centered and privacy-minded, and the importance of the concept of saving money, such as through the ten thousand bonus miles cited as an example, in the target community were also among the stereotypes mentioned:

ABBY: This is the American life. It's coupon, never money in your hands (laughing).

INTERVIEWER: OK, so what is Monty's response and why?

ABBY: He was surprised that this man don't want his money. And... Er... Now, that's it, he was surprised that no one wanted his coupon.

INTERVIEWER: Uh-hm...

ABBY: Because this is not usual. They off... They all scam toward anything that's free, and, you know... (laughing).

ABBY: Material! It's a material, materialistic society, this is what we can call American culture...

BOB: Hm, the only thing, the only thing that keeps point out is, these 10,000 bonus SkyMiles. It seems like even for something as losing a filling, you can earn something, that, that, that Americans may, erm, are tight with money, one; two, that, you know, I don't wanna use, eh... Cheapskate is a very bad term... Greedy, greedy would be a good term. Erm... always having something to do to get something free. That, in exchange for something I have, you have to give me something back. You know, that you can't just give me something because, you know... And it's a two-way street, too. If you want 10,000 SkyMiles, you know, then you have to do this for me. And if, and then, and then, you know, the other person can be like, you know, erm, I'll do this if you can give me this other thing. Yeah, so it's always this, this, this negotiation of, of, of... This negotiation of, you know, I'll do this for you if you do this for me under the codename, "Let's help each other."

Overall, the participants were able to construct meaning from the text. Despite the fact that the meaning they constructed varied from individual to individual and was not a perfect copy of the "ideal" native speaker-defined standard, the participants were not only able to demonstrate the meaning they constructed, but they actually managed to explain in detail why and how the meaning they constructed could be justified, effectively communicating their points of view to the interlocutor.

### Discussion

Despite the lack of proper schemata for the term “tooth fairy,” the participants were able to infer the meaning of the word from the context. The one subject who was previously told about the concept of a “tooth fairy” when he was a child, Bob, further built upon it to differentiate between the ideal and the given representation of a “tooth fairy.” For instance, the meaning inferred by the two subjects without schemata for the concept was that a tooth fairy is a potentially annoying, pop-up-like, and preferably female character with supernatural powers, in Roman clothes and in possession of magical artifacts, such as a magic wand and a roll of ancient papyrus (i.e., from the anthropological point of view, artifacts):

ABBY: And read an old paper, ancient paper, roll. And then get out a coupon and have a stick, magic stick.

All three participants understood that a tooth fairy comes to take one’s tooth, while that person is asleep, reaches underneath the pillow, extracts the tooth from its location, and replaces the tooth with money (indeed, a version very close to the native-set ideal) or some other item of a monetary value. Contrary to one of the participants’ observation that a tooth fairy must be male, the participant with existing schemata for the concept, Bob, repeatedly pointed out that a man with “bolding hair” and unattractive facial features may not, in fact, be a “real” tooth fairy. Schemata then actively contributed to meaning construction based on the images of the characters, yet lack thereof caused neither significant distraction from the ideal norm nor led the participants in a direction that was impossible for them to explain and personally identify with:

INTERVIEWER: So what does a tooth fairy normally look like?

CINDY: For me... (laughing)... Er, the image would be... would be a lady (laughing).

All of the participants were able to realize not only that Monty was angry (based on contextual clues, such as Monty shouting at the “tooth fairy”), but that his anger was caused by the person identifying himself as a “tooth fairy.” Furthermore, the negative attitude toward the visitor exhibited by Monty was detected by the participants; each of them was able to explain the reasons why he/she felt Monty was displeased with the appearance and utterances produced by the visitor. The interpretation of this anger varied from participant to participant, and that was



where differences based on schemata were further manifested. Consider the following example:

INTERVIEWER: OK... Alright, excellent! OK, so... So what is Monty's response? What's his response?

CINDY: Response to what?

INTERVIEWER: To the offer.

CINDY: To offer?

INTERVIEWER: Yeah. What does he do?

CINDY: He was shouting to him...

INTERVIEWER: Uh-hm.

CINDY: He... He was pretty annoyed.

INTERVIEWER: Uh-hm.

CINDY: Pretty upset. Erm. He... er... he didn't let any offer from him.

For instance, the age of eleven, which Monty mentions, is cited by Bob as the time of transition and a period of entering adulthood. The comic strip then becomes a metaphor for such a "crossover," an illustration of how in puberty a person can no longer reconnect with the norm set of pre-adolescence. This transition is forced by parents depriving their child of imagination, resulting in a development of a less caring, somewhat self-centered individual who (this varies from one participant to another) refuses to accept the truth or admit wrongdoing, goes against the materialistic social norm of seeking better deals, and without any hesitation defends his privacy by explicitly telling the guest to leave his property:

CINDY: (laughing) Anything he doesn't want... Like a, like a filling, the... Like a coupon... for a, what's that, a... For Total Control Listerine, anti-, anti-septic...

INTERVIEWER: Uh-hm.

CINDY: Things like that. Even, even when he was up, he was get out of the room.

In another example of how schemata influence perception, the economic aspect of the dialog taking place was mentioned by all three participants. However, one participant pitied the "tooth fairy" because the character appeared poor and reduced to handing out coupons while having lost the respect the "fairy" used to get from

the booming population, suggesting “economic hardship” (Bob). Monty in this situation is seen as a greedy person who refuses the old, traditional scheme of exchanging an item for an item and instead leaves the “tooth fairy” in his/her misery.

Another participant believes that, on the contrary, the “tooth fairy” tries to trick Monty into purchasing the goods he does not need. For example, the tooth fairy character is described by Abby as being “surprised that this man doesn’t want his money” and “that no one wanted his coupon.” Here, Monty becomes a victim and the “fairy” becomes a door-to-door, “not very attractive” salesman (Bob) shaming Monty into fulfilling his part of the socioeconomic obligation to provide a tooth in exchange for services. Bob details the temptation faced by Monty, who has to choose between maintaining his privacy and saving money. This inner conflict spills into an all-out confrontation when the deal is not what Monty has expected – and, therefore, there came a perceived revelation about the target culture where both parties in a dyad try to carefully maintain a balance between the private and the social.

Furthermore, a certain danger lies in stereotypes that can result from personal schemata combined with the content of the L2 text. For instance, when forced into making a sweeping generalization about the L2 culture based on this one artifact, all three participants constructed a stereotype (in a number of forms) in which America was seen as a culture devoid of non-materialistic camaraderie and facing economic hardship in an environment that does not support imagination. In fact, one of the participants added to this her own interpretation of the underlying mystery as to why Monty refused the offer:

CINDY: Pretty upset. Erm. He... er... He didn’t let any offer from him.

INTERVIEWER: OK, and why?

CINDY: Why? Erm... Because he refused to accept the fact...

INTERVIEWER: Uh-hm...

CINDY: He... that he, he has lost any tooth? Yeah. Hm... Erm... They are arrogant... er... That, er... They are afraid to admit that they are wrong or... er... Something faulting them... Erm... And also naïve...

L2 texts – indeed, all texts – can be polysemantic (Hanauer, 2001), and the polysemanticity of the text that was chosen for this study reflects the fact that culture does not exist independently of the human mind, i.e., it is based on interpretation

of the meaning of artifacts. Of course, it can also be argued that a given artifact never represents the whole and that even an artist's interpretation of cultural values is necessarily unique to him/her. Similarly, individuals interpreting the meaning of the story told in this comic strip based their interpretation of the phenomenon they saw not on culture in the abstract, but on their personal schemata both as members of imagined communities (Anderson, 2006; Kanno & Norton, 2003; Pavlenko, 2003) associated with their L1 and imagined communities associated, from their perspective, with the L2. In turn, a diverse linguistic community arises out of the idea that multiple points of view are possible and that the recognition of these schemata's existence does not automatically mean that one set of norms should be imposed on the language learners (Hanauer, 2003).

A very important assumption is that, despite lacking immediately apparent background knowledge of some of the concepts, the participants would be able to negotiate the meaning even further, had they been ESL students working in a structured cooperative environment, such as that attributed to teams in the collaborative learning philosophy of education. One may see the resulting final product as a branch of a tree, in which the stem is the more accepted native-set standard and the branches represent the individual, an alternative stemming from the same roots but, and this is also possible, not the same stem.

### **Practical Ramifications**

While this short study can only be one piece of the puzzle, a few specific recommendations for the classroom can be derived. The motivation for this study emerged at the intersection of the researcher's interest in visual literacy in the ESL classroom and the extreme need to re-think how culture is taught in the same classroom. In particular, looking at L2 cultural negotiation through the lens of personal linguaculture, as described above (Risager, 2008), it can be said that visual literacy materials – or, in fact, multiliteracy materials of any kind (The New London Group, 1996) – can provide an alternative to only focusing on verbal literacy in the L2 classroom. From this perspective, this study affects classroom practice in the following ways.

First, multiliteracy materials in the L2 classroom can be conceptualized as more than mere illustrations that play a supplementary role in the teaching and learning process. Indeed, visual literacy materials, such as comics and other visual

narratives, are a great conversation starter for the Communicative Language Teaching classroom or Suggestopedia exercises. But even more importantly, the status of such materials could be elevated to that of what is traditionally seen as legitimate literacy materials (Cary, 2004; Norton, 2001; Norton & Toohey, 2003). Weaving such materials into the ESL curriculum could be a more systematic effort on our part as a community of practice.

Second, at the moment, literature on this subject is extremely scarce. For instance, for an ESL teacher who would like experiment with visual narratives in his/her classroom, Cary's book on comics in a multilingual classroom (2004) can serve as an excellent starting point, but very few other book-length writings on this topic or guides exist. While some may see this as a problem, the researcher believes that it is the opposite – it is an opportunity to experiment with this type of materials and create something new. A typical introduction to ESL teaching methodology for pre-service teachers consists of a review of methods (Direct, Audiolingual, CLT, and so forth), including some of the more recently developed ones, but it does not tend to integrate multiliteracy materials to the fullest extent possible. Thus, it can be argued, new ESL teachers are not necessarily experienced in using comics and other visual narratives in the classroom, which, essentially, allows for more creative chaos in the experimentation process. But if teacher-generated knowledge is of value, and if theory must arise out of actual practical, empirical work in the classroom, then the absence of a significant amount of literature on the subject can spur development of techniques and approaches that can then be shared with our entire community of practice.

Third, one of the main foci of this short study was the issue of stereotypes and how they are supported (or not supported) through the process of meaning construction while interacting with visual narratives. Of course, the intuitive thing for a teacher to do would be to correct students' errors of interpretation on the spot and to seek to replace them with a version more closely matching what has been referred to here as the "native" standard. Indeed, for instance, Cindy's interpretation of the situation as Monty refusing to "accept the fact" that he has lost a tooth is incorrect from this inner-circle (Kachru, 1985) point of view. The fact that she then uses this interpretation to support a stereotype is also noteworthy. But what to do next is an interesting question. Should the teacher simply correct this and move on? Or is there a lesson to be learned here, and is it only

limited to language itself? From the researcher's point of view, the logical next step would be to have the entire class talk about how each student has interpreted the meaning of the comic strip and then look at the underlying schemata (including prejudice) together.

Finally, in English as a lingua franca environments, including a typical ESL classroom in the US (which tends to be culturally and linguistically diverse), it may not be enough to only correct such errors or illuminate the fact that more than one interpretation is possible. A growing movement in our community of practice connects meaningful L2 pedagogy with critical thinking and cross-cultural communication. It can be argued that one of the most practical ramifications is the more evident need to foster cross-cultural communication skills by questioning existing methods and mainstream views on what constitutes successful L2 acquisition.

English is a global language (Crystal, 1997), and thus, asking students to first read and then write and talk metacognitively about culture also means implying or asking directly questions about existing power structures in the field of language learning and teaching. This can lead to a better awareness of World Englishes, English as an International Language, and other views on the changes in how we approach the subject of linguistic diversity in the 21st century. Thus, L2 cultural negotiation's objectives and goals can be expanded to include more than the world of the Inner Circle (Kachru, 1985).

### **Final Remarks**

The assumption that people from different cultures will only be able to construct intelligible meaning if they learn to adhere to the native-set standard is incorrect. While the native-set standard is of much value to the language learner, limiting oneself to such a standard is neither beneficial nor appropriate in the context of English as a lingua franca. An approach that allows for multiple interpretations of discourses is quintessentially humanistic because it provides for a manifestation of the speaker's ever-changing cultural and personal schemata that contribute to the diversity in communication. Indeed, the issue should be not the multitude of possible interpretations in various contexts but the degree to which such interpretations are mutually intelligible and explainable. When such an explanation is possible, one may argue, the ability to go beyond the native-defined

cultural standard can be achieved. Naturally, to better understand the processes involved in L2 meaning construction and negotiation, further research is recommended; this short study, approaching the task from the vantage point of multiliteracies, is one of the forays into this largely uncharted territory.

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### **Appendix: Interview questionnaire**

- 1) Who is a tooth fairy?/Based on what you see here, what is a tooth fairy?
- 2) Which of the characters is a tooth fairy? How do you know? Could you describe the tooth fairy? Does the tooth fairy here look like a real tooth fairy?
- 3) What does a tooth fairy normally offer?
- 4) In your opinion, why is Monty offered coupons?
- 5) What is Monty's response, and why?
- 6) In your opinion, what can we learn about the American culture from this particular story/comic strip?