Sample essay 2

Should culture be an overt component of EFL instruction outside of English speaking countries? If so what culture should be taught and how should it be taught?

Introduction

Culture has become an increasingly important component of English language teaching in recent times. There are a number of reasons for this related to a view of language that incorporates a wider social and culture perspective and to the increasingly multicultural use of English. To illustrate this second point this paper will briefly examine the use of English in Thailand and the teaching of culture. This will then be followed by a discussion of some of the difficulties involved in teaching culture, especially outside of the central English speaking countries. Some suggestions will be made as to how these may be overcome and how we might approach the teaching of culture. Finally it will be suggested that teaching language and culture are inseparable and hence raising learners' awareness of culture, both English and their own, is an essential part of English language teaching.

The cultural context of language
Writers such as Boas, Halliday and Hymes have changed our view regarding the position of language to include the wider context of culture and socio-pragmatics. In particular Halliaday's (1979) and Halliday and Hasan's (1984) socio-semiotic view of language emphasizes the social meanings that language both represents and shapes. Therefore every language will reflect the values, beliefs and assumptions of the culture it came from. Thus learning a language will we also involve learning the culture the language expresses. Subsequently our view of language teaching has also changed to incorporate this link between culture and language. Being competent in communication involves more than just an understanding of the syntax and range of expression within a language. Hymes' (1972) definition of communicative competence, which underpins much of communicative language teaching, highlights the importance of understanding the socio-linguistics aspects of language.

English teaching and use in a foreign culture: Thailand
English has become the lingua franca of the present time it is used and taught in a diverse range of situations and cultures throughout the world, often far removed, in both distance and in beliefs and values, from the cultures of the original English speaking countries. Many of these contexts of use, such as Asia have very different beliefs, value systems and educational doctrines to the traditional English speaking countries such as Great Britain and the United States (Tomalin and Stempleski, 1993). Taking Thailand as an example, English is the second language for most Thais and is taught in schools often from the first years of schooling (O'Sullivan and Tajaroensuk, 1997). Furthermore some ability in English is a requisite of higher education. A national survey of English use revealed English being used to communicate with native speakers (NS) from both the 'central' English speaking countries (the UK, the US, Australia, etc), and non-NS from countries such as, Japan and Germany as an international language (Wongsatorn et. al. 1996). At school and in higher education English is generally taught by Thai teachers with a small number of native English speaking teachers (NEST), however there is also a large commercial language school sector that employs almost

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exclusively NESTs (Kershaw 1994). This provides a mixed picture of English use, as it is used both to communicate with NS and with non-NS, who may not share the cultural assumptions of NS. Moreover it is taught in the main by non-NESTs who may again have different cultural beliefs from NESTs. Williams (1992) has also mentioned the mixed usage of English in Thailand and other writers such as Ellis, and Kramsch and Sullivan (1996) have illustrated English being used in a variety of Asian contexts removed from native speaker norms. This raises a number of issues which will be discussed below.

Difficulties in teaching culture
Which culture?
As the case of Thailand illustrates English teaching and use may occur in a wide variety of contexts in non-English speaking countries, that often do not involve English NS. This raises the important question of what culture we should be addressing when teaching culture. Surely if not all communication is taking place with English NS then it may not be relevant to teach English speaking culture. This has lead writers such as Alptekin and Alptekin (1984) to suggest that we should not be teaching English with reference to English-speaking countries' cultures. Rather they suggest that English should be taught in a way that is independent from this cultural content, and refers only to the "international attitudes" (Alptekin and Alptekin, 1984:16) of international English. However, they do not specify what these 'international attitudes' might be, and furthermore I would agree with Medgyes (1999:7) in doubting that there is any one identifiable variety of English that could be called 'international English'. Perhaps most importantly though is Alptekin and Alptekin's suggestion that English can somehow be taught without culture. As stated at the beginning of this paper, culture and language are inexorably linked and as such cannot be separated. Numerous authors (see for example Valdes, 1986, 1990, Kramsch 1993) have highlighted the impossibility of teaching English without teaching culture. Whether culture is consciously or unconsciously part of the teachers' pedagogic aims the transmission of culture is unavoidable. The content of what we teach will always be in some way linked to culture, as Valdes points out, every lesson is about something and that something is cultural (1990: 20). Nevertheless, the central question of what culture should be taught still remains, and I would agree with Alptekin and Alptekin in questioning the relevance of focusing on English speaking culture in all contexts. I will return to this issue for a fuller discussion later in the paper.

Stereotyping
A point not discussed so far but of significance is the difficulty of avoiding stereotypes when teaching culture. Guest (2002) has argued that attempts to identify national characteristics for the purposes of comparing and contrasting cultures, leads to oversimplification and stereotypes of cultural characteristics. Moreover, he believes that focusing on national cultural stereotypes ignores the individual and the diverse range of equally important sub-cultures that every individual is a part of. Guest suggests that culture is best left to covert, unconscious transmission rather than direct teaching (2002: 160). Furthermore an examination of TESOL materials by Clarke and Clarke (1990) illustrated the one sided, idealized and narrow view of culture presented in many of these materials. This they claim can create an unrealistic stereotyped view of English culture in learners, especially when learners

compare the culture presented in TESOL materials with their own more balanced view of their own culture (1990:35).

These problems illustrates some of the difficulties in teaching culture and the necessity of avoiding stereotypes, however they do not seem to support avoiding teaching culture directly as Guest proposes. Rather this highlights the importance of the distinction between generalisations and stereotypes. Stereotypes are fixed and are not open to change or modification with experience, whereas generalisations are flexible and change over time with our experiences (Clarke and Clarke 1990:34) and thus can aid understanding. As Lado (1957 cited in Valdes 1986) notes when comparing two cultures we must be very careful in the generalisations we make and be prepared to revise or change these generalisations as our understanding of another culture develops. As regards ignoring the individual Kramsch (1993) has highlighted the constant conflict between the individual and the personal meanings they may try to communicate and the larger context of society in which those meanings are expressed. As language teachers and learners this is a conflict we cannot avoid but must be aware of. We should not, as Guest feels, ignore that task, as being too difficult or complex, but accept it as a part of understanding a culture and the individuals within it. Furthermore, in no way does making generalisations about other national cultures and our own in the teaching of culture imply that we should ignore other aspects of culture such as gender, class, or ethnicity and Kramsch (1993:49) urges teachers to consider this range of diversity within culture.

In support of teaching culture
A reoccurring theme of this paper has been that language and culture and inseparable, and even writers such as Guest (2002), who question the purpose of direct teaching of culture, accept that in teaching English we will also be transmitting the values of English culture. Kramsch has pointed out that "language teachers are so much teachers of culture that culture has often become invisible to them."(1993: 48). If this is the case then culture would surely be best approached in the same kind of systematic way in which other aspects of language such as grammar and vocabulary are dealt with, as Valdes remarks if culture is an unavoidable part of language teaching, then "recognizing the culture lessons to be learned for what they are and making the most of them enhances the learning experience." (1990:20). What kind of systematic approach we might take will be discussed later.

Finally, a far from insignificant reason for teaching culture is its popularity amongst learners. Over half of the learners in a survey by Prodromou (1992) indicated an interest in learning about the native culture of English, and the higher the level of English the more important learners felt it was to learn about culture. These results support my own experiences, where students often express a desire to learn about English speaking culture on needs analysis forms. In addition an optional course offered at the university where I teach entitled 'The culture of English speaking peoples' is highly popular are often over-subscribed. Further support comes indirectly from a survey by Timmis (2002), in which the majority of learners and teachers of English from a large range of countries expressed a desire to speak English according to native speaker norms, however the survey also demonstrated a wish to retain aspects of their own culture such as accent, especially amongst Asian students (Timmis 2002: 242). These surveys would seem to provide good

evidence for teaching the culture of English speaking countries, although I would suggest not only English speaking culture should be taught but also other cultures need to be examined. In particular learners need to develop an awareness of their *own* and other cultures and this will be dealt with more fully in the examination of approaches to teaching culture.

This discussion has hopefully demonstrated that teaching culture should be a part of ELT despite some of the difficulties raised. I would now like to look at some possible approaches to this task and how they might further answer some of the doubts discussed above.

Approaches to teaching culture

Cultural comparisons

Culture has traditionally often been taught through transmission of facts about the culture in courses such as *Landeskunde* in Germany and *civilisation* in France. These courses have been concerned with presenting information about the target culture such as history, geography, institutions, the arts, traditions and way of life (Tomalin and Stempleski, 1993). However our view of culture has broadened to include a more interpretive approach towards culture (Kramsch 1993: 24). Instead of just being concerned with the facts of one culture the emphasis has moved towards interpreting culture based on cross-cultural understanding involving comparisons and contrasts with a learners' native culture and the culture of the language they are studying (see Valdes 1986). Dunnet et. al. suggest six aspects of culture that learners and teachers should be familiar with.

> (1) Languages cannot be translated word-for-word…(2) The tone of a speaker's voice (the intonation pattern) carries meaning… (3) Each language-culture employs gestures and body movements which convey meaning…(4) … languages use different grammatical elements for describing all parts of the physical world. (5) All cultures have taboo topics…(6) In personal relationships, the terms for addressing people vary considerably among languages.
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> (1986:148-149)

Teachers and learners should be aware of these features and be prepared to analysis both their own culture and the target culture according to such criteria. Lado provides a systematic approach to analysing culture so that "we may have more accurate understanding of each of the cultures being compared." (1957 cited in Valdes 1986:53)

Kramsch's "Third Places"

A contrastive approach to culture should aid learners' understanding of another culture, however it will be necessary to go beyond this to achieve a full understanding of culture. If, as has been the position of this paper, language and culture are inseparable than surely as learners acquire a new language they will also be acquiring a new culture. However we cannot expect this culture to be the same as either the learners' native culture or the culture of the language they are studying. The learner will initially have a synthesis with their own culture, and in learning a foreign language such as English may use it in ways that express meaning in their own culture. However as their understanding of a foreign language develops they may

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come to understand other values and meanings familiar to the foreign culture that are alien to their own culture. Yet their understanding of these values and meanings may still be different to that of the native speaker. Kramsch (1993:15-33) illustrates this well, with a comparison of the word '*challenge*' across different cultures. This leads Kramsch to suggest that foreign language learning takes place in a 'third place' that the learner must make for him/herself between their first culture (C1) and the foreign language culture (C2). This 'third place' involves the language learner in an objective and subjective reflection of C1 and C2 from which they must choose there own meanings that best reflect their personal perspectives.

Kramsch (1993:205-206) proposes an examination of four aspects of culture in keeping with this view of cultural acquisition:

1. Establishing a sphere of interculturality – relating C1 to C2 and reflecting on perceptions of C1 and C2
2. Teaching culture as an interpersonal process – going beyond the presentation of cultural facts and moving towards a process of understanding foreignness
3. Teaching culture as difference – culture should not be viewed as only national traits, many other aspects of culture such as age, race, gender, social class need to be considered
4. Crossing disciplinary boundaries – Teachers need to have some understanding of a wider range of subjects such as sociology, ethnography, and sociolinguistics.

If this process of acquiring culture and language is successful, learners should be able to use English in such a way as to communicate effectively with English NS and also in a way that reflects their own local cultures and personal beliefs (see Kramsch and Sullivan 1996). Learners of English will no longer be seen as trying to be pseudo-native English speakers but as speakers in their own right. This seems a more realistic and appropriate aim for many EFL learners in contexts outside of the central English speaking countries than that of the ideal native speaker. Furthermore it gives the learners their own choice of how best to approach communication and express personal meanings.

Pedagogic Implementation
The above discussion of language and culture suggests that the teaching of culture should take place within the normal language classroom and not as a separate subject. As it is within the classroom that EFL learners acquire English language and hence culture, it is surely at this point that culture should be discussed. Many writers (Kramsch 1993, Tomalin and Stempleski 1993 and Valdes 1990) view the content of what takes place in the language classroom as the ideal material with which to address culture. This may be for many learners especially in 'foreign' EFL contexts their first point of contact and possible conflict with a foreign culture. Furthermore the language classroom provides plenty of opportunity for 'meta-talk' (Kramsch 1993: 246) or discussion of the language and behaviours presented.

Materials and content in EFL instruction should try to make learners aware of the cultural content of language learning and encourage learners to compare English culture with their own. Materials that do this will, as Valdes (1990:23)

suggests, prove successful with learners and such popular course books as Headway (Soars) and Interchange (Richards) provide good examples of this. However in preparing such materials it is necessary to avoid the kind of oversimplifications and stereotypes mentioned earlier by Clarke and Clarke (1990). Moreover these materials must also encourage learners to compare cultures and to take a critical perspective. Tomalin and Stempleski (1993) propose a range of tasks such as class discussions, research and role-plays using materials drawn from English speaking countries that promote discussions, comparisons and reflection on English culture and the learners own culture. These are arranged around such subjects as cultural symbols and products, cultural behaviour, values and attitudes, patterns of communication, and exploring cultural experiences (Tomalin and Stempleski 1993:11-12).

Teaching training both for the NEST and non-NEST should equip them to deal with culture and cultural contrasts as they arise in English teaching. In the context of learning English in non-English speaking countries, for the local non-NEST knowledge of English culture and of their own culture would be necessary and some time spent in an English speaking country would be valuable. For the NEST a good understanding of their learners' culture and language and also of their own culture would also be valuable. This would imply the advantages of NEST teachers with long-term experience working in their learners' country and would certainly advocate non-NEST and NEST teachers working together. Such co-operation in materials and course planning would hopefully reduce or at least anticipate some of the many cross-cultural difficulties encountered such as different teaching and learning styles (Oxford and Anderson 1995, Reid 1987), styles of discourse, different content schema when approaching reading tasks (Steffensen and Joag-Dev 1984) and diverse writing styles (Kaplan 1966, O'Sullivan and Tajaroensuk, 1997).

Summary
If culture and language are interlinked and inseparable then we need to try and teach culture in some kind of systematic way, as we try to do with other aspects of language. However there are problems in deciding what culture to teach, possibly creating cultural stereotypes and ignoring the individual when teaching culture. Furthermore, in many foreign countries, such as Thailand, English is often used as an international language rather than as a means of communicating with English speakers from English speaking countries bringing into question the relevance of English speaking culture. Nevertheless, these difficulties do not mean that culture should be ignored or left to unconscious processes. Learners and teachers should be aware of the cultural aspects of communication and language and need to be able to interpret these on both national and individual levels. They should also be prepared to re-evaluate and re-assess their knowledge based on experience. Learners also need to be encouraged to view using a second language as a new cultural experience and not part of either their native culture or the TL culture. Communication in an L2 or FL takes place in a 'third place'. Teacher training, materials, and course content need to reflect such uses of English.

Conclusion

Sample essay 2

This paper has tried to demonstrate that teaching language and culture are inexorably interlinked whether it is in the TL country or a foreign country. Surely then it is better to undertake this process consciously and in a systematic way. Furthermore, the view of language learning presented above encourages learners to view themselves as acquiring a new culture and one that enables them to take a cross-cultural perspective on their own and the TL culture. This is especially relevant to teaching English in non-English speaking countries, whilst making learners aware of English NS norms it does not stress the need for learners to always follow those norms. Rather this gives learners the opportunity to express both local cultural and individual meanings. Hopefully, instead of ignoring the individual and creating cultural stereotypes, such a view of language and language teaching should generate more diversity within the international use of English.

Word Count 3301

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