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# INTERCULTURAL AWARENESS IN TEACHING ENGLISH AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE

**Elena Savu**

**Politehnica University of Bucharest**

*Abstract: Since language and culture are inseparable, foreign language teaching involves not only language teaching, but also approaching the culture of that language. One way to do that is to raise the learners' intercultural awareness by integrating cultural elements into teaching. In this way, learners are likely to gain a higher degree of the desired competence to use the language for successful communication outside the classroom. The current paper will focus on practical examples from everyday teaching in Politehnica University in which culture is highlighted and promoted together with language.*

*Keywords: intercultural awareness, cultural differences, EFL teaching, writing a letter*

## Preliminary remarks

The current paper is inspired by the author's rich and long experience of teaching English for Professional Communication and ESP to engineering students in the "Politehnica" University of Bucharest. The paper approaches the issue of integrating 'culture' into language teaching, reviews the rationale of such an option and presents an example of a learning task aimed at developing the students' intercultural awareness.

One of the major reasons why young people learn English today is that English is the international language of business and technology. This apparently confers English the status of 'a lingua franca'. According to the dictionary definition, a lingua franca is a language that is adopted as a common language between people whose native languages are different. A 'lingua franca' operates as a neutral communication tool, is de-nationalized and does not belong to any particular country. Researchers like Gonzales (1995:58) reinforce this idea by stating that "English is deracinated or uprooted from its original cultural soil; only special registers of science and technology, business and geopolitics are used." But can this be actually valid for the English language that we have been cherishing in our profession? For most of us, English will continue to be the language of Shakespeare and it will always be associated with England and America. On the other hand, businesses and professions cross borders and raise the challenge of intercultural communication and close interactions with people from other cultures, target cultures included. As someone remarked, today's world has moved from 'globalization' into a new era of global interconnectedness in which people depend on each other through information, ideas and the technology that has pervaded every domain of life and human activity. When scientists, engineers and business professionals meet counterparts, they do not talk only science or business, so the English language is used to achieve a myriad of communicative goals both inside and outside interpersonal contexts. Therefore, no matter what sort of language English has become nowadays, there seems to be no doubt whatsoever that "it is virtually impossible to teach a language without teaching

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cultural content." (Valdes, 1986:121) When we teach English we cannot ignore the cultural load the language bears, and this is not an ungrounded assumption. The field literature signals the dual character of a language as a primary means of communication but also as a carrier of culture (Wei, 2005:56).

Successful communication involves understanding of the messages sent or received. The problem is that understanding is governed by the 'attribution of meaning' that participants give to the message. A language takes into custody the conceptual system of the culture it belongs to since "Cultural patterns, customs and ways of life are expressed in language; culture-specific world views are reflected in language." (Brown, 1986: 45) In the global communication network of today, attribution of meaning will be different because cultures are different. This truism has a considerable impact on the language teaching profession because, if language and culture cannot be separated, it means that language teaching and learning involves culture teaching andlearning (Gao, 2006:59). In practice, this leads to the need for the EFL (English as a Foreign Language) practitioners to equip their learners with an appropriate type of communicative competence within which both language and culture are encoded and decoded.

There are different views on the type of 'culture' within EFL teaching, and we believe there is a point in each one of them. One perspective ((Byram, 1989; Byram & Flemming, 1998) supports the idea that the 'target language culture' should be taught along with the English language to 'acculturate' language learners into the cultures of English speaking countries. The other one states that, given the current status of English as a lingua franca, the language should be approached in a culture-free context (Jenkins, 2005, Seidlhofer, 2001).
We strongly believe that the option for one type of 'culture' or another should be dictated by the learners' needs regarding the English they study. That is the reason why the term 'culture' teaching used in this paper should not be understood as providing cultural information on a specific culture, e.g. Britain or the U.S. Our goal of 'culture' teaching in a technical university is not knowing about a certain culture but empowering our learners to cope with efficient communication in any professional and personal encounter outside the classroom. We aim to foster a battery of skills and strategies in our engineering students that will help them make sense of the diversity around them. Thus, in addition to dealing with the four classical language skills of reading, listening, writing and speaking, we need to make room for the fifth language skill, i.e. culture.

'Culture' is a very comprehensive concept and, due to local language learning priorities and time constraints, we do not wish to be overambitious. Of all the elements[1] that Tomalin (2008) suggests for inclusion in culture teaching, we have chosen to focus on 'cultural skills' because our learners are going to use English as a means of interaction and they need to develop their intercultural awareness regarding 'otherness'. Developing intercultural awareness involves not only learning how to be able to accept a different experience of language and context in an open and flexible way but also to become aware of your own 'culture' in terms of beliefs, values and practices.

## 2. Intercultural Awareness – Key to the door of culture

Cultural awareness becomes a core point when people from different cultures interact. Humans see, interpret and evaluate things in various ways. What is considered appropriate behaviour in one culture is frequently inappropriate in another, and this is explained by the different 'attribution of meaning' based on the individual knowledge of the world or the frame

[1] Cultural knowledge, cultural values, cultural behaviour and cultural skills

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of reference determined by a specific culture of origin. Misunderstandings arise when meanings from one culture are used to make sense of another culture's reality.

Cultural awareness sets in motion "a gradually developing inner sense of the equality of cultures, an increased understanding of your own and other people's cultures, and a positive interest in how cultures both connect and differ" (Tomlinson, 2001, cited in Tomlinson & Masuhara, 2004: 3). As a result, working on cultivating or enhancing the learners' cultural awareness helps them to broaden the mind, increase tolerance (Tomlinson, 2001) and achieve cultural empathy and sensitivity (Tomlinson & Masuhara, 2004). According to Tomalin and Stempleski (1993: 5), cultural awareness leads to awareness of one's own culturally-induced behaviour, awareness of the culturally-induced behaviour of others and the ability to explain one's own cultural standpoint.

Beyond setting goals, the immediately challenging question for the language practitioner is how to develop the learners' sensitivity towards cultural differences in the class. Byram and Planet (2000:189) suggest the comparative approach considering its advantages of offering a double perspective on culture - the learner's culture and the target culture - and the non-judgemental assessment of its quality, i.e. neither is better, they are different. This method is supported by many scholars because of the complex process of analysis, comparison and contrast which encourages learning and provides motivation to the learners.

A comparative approach guides learners to identify cultural similarities and differences with the target culture in comparison with their own culture. This process is very likely to generate a high degree of cultural knowledge, understanding and acceptance, which are the prerequisites of achieving successful intercultural communication. Byram and Planet (2000:189) argue that "comparison makes the strange, the other familiar, and makes the familiar, the self strange – and therefore easier to reconsider". With an understanding of their own culture, learners gain the ability to gradually decentre from their own culture (Byram, 1989; Kramsch, 1993) and develop necessary skills and knowledge to function in the communication cobweb of diversity.

Our practice has shown that, if planned thoughtfully, learning tasks which involve comparative comparison can reveal the double perspective by confronting target culture elements and by interpreting own ways of doing things to discover the specific 'cultural' difference and gain valuable insights. Training our students to become culturally sensitive through reflection we actually facilitate their way to find a "third place' (Kramsch, 1993), which basically means to construct their modern identitites. Learners decentre from their first culture, analyse the target culture and take a 'third place' where they can objectively observe and reflect on both their own and the target culture (Byram, 1989; Kramsch, 1993). Kramsch indicates that this 'third place' is the one where L2 learners synthesize elements of different cultures and establish their own understanding of the cultural differences between those cultures. As Crozet and Liddicoat (2000) point out it is at this stage that language learners bridge the gap between cultural differences and achieve their personal and communicative goals.

One of the textbooks we use in 'Politehnica' University of Bucharest is English for Science and Technology[2]. It was published within the PROSPER Project coordinated by the British Council. The book was written by local teachers from 'Politehnica' University and it

[2] English for Science and Technology, Cavallioti Publishing House, Bucharest, 1996

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was designed primarily for classroom use. The textbook addresses engineering students at an intermediate level of English and it is organized in 10 units[3].

At the time when it was written, there was little concern about 'culture' teaching as such, the focus being on implementing the communicative approach in tertiary education in our country. Pulverness (2004:28) is right when he firmly encourages teachers to go beyond the textbook and provide learners with supplementary resources that would introduce cultural polyphony and 'add value' to the textbook. He claims that supplementary materials would compensate for the cultural dimensions that are totally missing in the course book. What we should understand from his statement is that it is up to each foreign language practitioner to diversify the range of classroom teaching in relation to the goals they wish to achieve. In other words, the teacher can institute "a sphere or interculturality in the EFL classroom so that individuals gain insight into their own culture. These insights can then be shared in cross-cultural encounters undertaken in international contexts." (McKay, 2002: 100)

## 3. A Practical Example

The task chosen to exemplify the way we are trying to build our students' cultural awareness comes from English for Science and Technology, Unit 1. It is a writing activity – "A Letter of Complaint".

The development of the cultural components is based on the students' construction of own knowledge through cultural exploration and an understanding of their own and the target culture's values and beliefs reflected in writing this type of document.

The learners with whom we trialled the activity are in their first-year of study, both males and females of ages ranging between 18 and 20. Overall, they are a mixed-competence group of 30 but the general level of teaching is intermediate towards upper intermediate.

Section B.6 – A letter of Complaint - is structured around three activities shown in Appendix 1. The textbook input material has been adjusted to integrate the 'cultural awareness' element within the broader language teaching goals it was designed for.

Step 1. The question from B.6.1. was used to introduce the topic of writing a letter of complaint. The teacher directs the discussion towards the real life problem of cleanliness and rubbish collection on the campus and in the area of the students' hostels.

Step 2. Students are asked to write a letter of complaint about the inefficient rubbish collection in the students' residential area. They are not given any guiding lines. Students work in pairs.

Step 3. Students display their letters. Letters are compared in terms of similarities and differences in the language used, organization, style, layout, writing conventions. Students correct language mistakes in their peers' letters.

Step 4. Students read the model letter in the textbook, answer the questions that follow it. Students discuss similarities (if any!) and differences between the given model and their own pieces of writing. Questions to ask: In what ways does your version of the letter reflect Romanian culture? What does the model letter tell you about English-speaking culture? Points to focus on:

- letter writing conventions, e.g. sender's address, greeting formula, heading, etc;
- reader friendliness, e.g. layout, format, etc.;
- style, i.e. formal versus informal;
- organization and sequence, i.e. introduction, body and ending;

[3] Unit 1.Engineering Design; Unit 2. Transoport; 3. Energy; 4. The Media; 5. Computers; 6. Environment; 7. Robotics; 8. Applying for a Job; 9. Marketing and Advertising a Product; 10. Management

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- language used to express the complaint, e.g. lexis and modals;
- length of sentences and paragraphs;
- clarity.
- particular cultural aspects: acknowledgemet of both genders unlike the mainly male addressee in Romanian letters ("Stimate Domn=Dear Sir or Mr. Administrator), beginning and ending in a positive way, the use of heading to draw attention to the problem described in the letter, brevity and conciseness. Appendix 2 provides the same students' before and after version of the letter. Language mistakes, 'cultural' inappropriacy and parts that were particularly analysed from a cultural perspective have been bolded in the "before" version for comparison with the 'after' piece of writing.

Step 5. Ask students to rewrite their original letters taking into consideration the highlights they gained from the previous stages of the activity. Question to ask: *Would your original letter have been considered 'appropriate' in an English speaking environment?*

## 4. Discussion

The activity presented is an attempt to put language into a cultural framework that could foster the learners' awareness of different cultural norms and attitudes. The idea underlying this task was not to encourage imitation of a model but to give the students opportunities to *observe*, *think about* and *process* a new experience. The first version is a piece of writing which reflects many aspects of Romanian culture such as a very direct and abrupt style with little tactfulness, critical language and redundant elements, e.g. the name of the sender. Although not perfect, the 'after' version has integrated changes which show that a process of change has taken place. What we consider is very important is the fact that, during the activity, the students were actively involved in producing language and analyzing it from a cultural standpoint.

## Final remarks

Communication is not only a simple exchange of words between interlocutors, it is "a sociological encounter" in which, through the exchange of meanings, social reality is "created, maintained and modified" (Halliday, 1978:169). Learning how to cope with a new experience from reassessed psychological, social and cultural perspectives can be a process of intellectual maturation and personal transformation. By embedding 'cultural' cues in teaching and learning how to write a letter of complaint, we tried to give a glimpse of a different way of participating in an interaction and achieving a communicative goal. It is obvious that no textbook perfectly integrates language and culture education, and language practitioners need to build up supplemental activities if they wish to make 'culture' learning a consistent component of their classes.

To conclude, we would like to reiterate the idea that culture and language are interwoven and cannot be actually separated in foreign language teaching and learning since, if any one of them is left out, the other remains incomplete.

We do not claim that this is the best way to integrate culture into the EFL class but such tasks represent our attempts to respond to the current challenges of language teaching and changing learning needs. As McKay states when she discusses what types of goals and methods should inform the teaching of English as an international language, it is perhaps the time to accept "that the concept of thinking globally but acting locally is highly relevant to the teaching of EIL. The evidence clearly suggests that the use of EIL will continue to grow, as an international language that belongs, not just to native speakers, but to all of its users. Given

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this shift in ownership, the time has come for decisions regarding teaching goals and approaches to be given to local educators so they can take their rightful place as valid users of English." (2002:129)

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## APPENDIX 1

**B.6. A letter of Complaint (English for Science and Technology, Unit 1, pp. 11-12)**

**B.6.1.** *Why do people write letters of complaint? Read the letter below and answer the questions that follow it:*

**2.** **1**. Bdul Dacia 81, 7261, Bucuresti

City Council
Bdul Elisabeta 18
6145 Bucuresti

12 June 2016

Dear Sir/Madam **3.**

*Collection of Rubbish* **4.**

Until very recently, rubbish from our apartment block has been collected regularly every Tuesday. My neighbours and I have been pleased with the efficiency of the staff concerned.

Over the past three weeks, however, I regret that collection has been late, and the staff have left rubbish all over the street and pavements. On pointing this out to them, I have met with abuse.

I shall be glad if you will take this matter up with the staff concerned, and ensure that the situation improves.

I look forward to hearing from you.

Yours faithfully
Rhoda Bannister

1. Whose address is this?
2. Whose name and address is this? othe suitable
3. Why is the sender writing "Sir/Madam"?
4. Why is there a heading? Is it a good heading? thinl it
6. Which are complaining' words?
7. Is this a good ending? Can you think of ways of ending such a letter?
8. Is this a proper complaint letter? Do you

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5. Which paragraph is about things that: meets its purpose?
   (a) are happening in the present?
   (b) Will happen in the future?
   (c) Have happened in the past?

**B.6.2.** *This is a letter of complaint written by a buyer who wants to have his video recorder replaced. Fill in the gaps in the letter with the words given below, and make any further improvement necessary from your study of the letter in B.6.1.*

**under guarantee, used, hearing, complain, defective, regret, delay, agent, appreciate.**

*Bdul Pacii 70*
*7244 Bucuresti Romania*

*Philips Recording Co.*
*21 Hill Place*
*Nottinghamb NG09, UK* *13 March 2016*

*Dear Sir,*
*I am writing to (1)..., about the AQ 5312 Philips recorder which I bought two weeks ago. I (2)... to inform you that ever since I bought it I have had a lot of trouble. Since it is still (3) ..., I returned it to your (4) ... for repair, but nevertheless it cannot be (5) ... I am afraid the recorder is (6)... and I do not want to have it repaired again. I would (7) ... your replacing it without (8) ,...*

*I look forward to (9) ... from you by return.*
*Yours faithfully,*
*Mihai Ionescu*

**B.6.3.** *Work with your colleague and write a letter of complaint for a product you have recently bought.*

## APPENDIX 2

**I. "Before version"**

**???** **???**

10th April 2016

**Mr. Administrator**,

**My name is Gabriel Ionescu**. and I live in the P22 hostel from Politehnica campus.

I've written this letter to **complaint** about some **negative** aspects related to the way in which your employees are collecting the rubbish in **my** area. You should be aware that they only collect it twice a month. As a result of **this carelessness,** a horrible smell invades our room when we open the window. **And we really can't stand it anymore!** Besides that the garbage is a real source of infection.

**I hope** you'll **take the appropriate actions** and try to solve this problem as soon as **you can!**

**Thank you for your time.**

**????**

Gabriel Ionescu

**II. "After version"**

P 22 Hostel
Room 105

City council
Bd. Victoriei 42
Politehnica Campus

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7258 Bucharest Bucharest

10th April 2016

Dear Sir/madam

Collection of Rubbish

Until last year, rubbish in our area was collected every Monday morning. All the students in the hostels on Politehnica campus were pleased with the regularity and efficiency of the City Council's services.

Since the beginning of the year 2016, however, rubbish has been collected twice a month. We are sorry for this carelessness on the part of the City Council. As a result, there is a disturbing smell all over the area, especially when windows are open. I think that uncollected rubbish can be a source of danger to people's health.

We shall appreciate if you will take the appropriate course of action and solve this problem soon.

We look forward to hearing from you.

Yours faithfully
Gabriel Ionescu

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