

An Introduction to English Language Teaching

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First Semester
Lecture 13:

- **Culture and the Language Teacher**



What is culture?

Culture refers to the common beliefs and values of a people and the behaviors that reflect them. Common beliefs and values differ from culture to culture, as well as the behavior associated with them. Anthropologist John H. Bodley (1994, 22) describes culture simply as “what people think, make, and do.” Bodley sees culture as a socially transmitted set of common beliefs that include symbolic, mental, behavioral, and material aspects patterned to provide a model for behavior and create a common framework for human society.

It could be argued that an integral part of learning a foreign language is acquiring some familiarity with the culture associated with it. For teachers of English as a foreign language (EFL), the question is, “How can we incorporate cultural knowledge and understanding within the context of our English language classes?” Simply having an acquaintance with the grammar, syntax, phonetics, and some of the social conventions associated with English will not give learners real insights into the nuances of the daily lives of the people whose language they hope to speak. Increasingly, language teachers are recognizing the need to incorporate sociocultural factors into their classrooms (Palmer and Sharifian 2007); however, there is a lack of consensus on how to introduce cultural elements into the lessons.

Challenges of Incorporating Culture into the Classroom



One challenge a teacher faces is what approach to take. Many EFL teachers have had no formal training in incorporating cultural elements, and there is no universally accepted set of criteria that instructors can use as a guide (Byrnes 2008). One approach, though, would be to adapt Michael Paige's (in Cohen et al. 2003, 53) dimensions of culture learning model. Paige groups culture learning into categories:

1. the self as cultural
2. the elements of culture
3. intercultural phenomena (culture-general learning)
4. particular cultures (culture-specific learning)
5. acquiring strategies for culture learning

By exploring these dimensions, teachers can help students connect to the target culture, raise their awareness of cultural differences, and improve their “intercultural communicative competence” (Byram 1997).

The Self as Cultural

All people are members of at least one culture. Whether or not we realize it, the culture we belong to affects how we think, interact, communicate, and transmit knowledge from one generation to another. The ability to ask and answer questions based on our own culture facilitates the process of making connections across cultures. English teachers can help students activate their “cultural antennas” by making them aware of important elements of their own culture and helping them understand how their culture has shaped them (Byram 1997; NSFLEP 1999, 9). Kramsch (1993) calls this learning process establishing a “sphere of interculturality.” When people think of culture, they often think of artifacts such as food, clothing, music, art, or literature. Others may associate culture with conventions such as social interaction patterns, values, ideas, and attitudes.

The Self as Cultural

Teachers can guide students to think about what people “think, make, and do” in their own cultures by asking them to consider questions like these:

1. What behaviors reflect our culture, and how are they learned and shared?
2. What important factors (social, religious, and economic) influence our culture?
3. What are some important traditions that are unique to our country?
4. What ideals and values bind our culture together?
5. How does culture in our country function as a way for humans to live with one another?
6. What symbols are prevalent in our culture?

Classroom discussions based on these considerations can foster an atmosphere that encourages EFL students to think about their own culture and make connections across cultures while studying English. To create a “sphere of interculturality” in our classrooms, we can encourage students to construct their own notions of culture instead of simply feeding them preformed information about these topics.

The Elements of Culture



Elements of culture refer to things like the beliefs, values, customs, products, and the communication styles of a given culture or society (Cohen et al. 2003). The Standards for Foreign Language Learning provides a framework for students to integrate “the philosophical perspectives, the behavioral practices, and the products—both tangible and intangible—of a society”. This has become known as the 3P model of culture:

1. Perspectives (what members of a culture think, feel, and value)
2. Practices (how members communicate and interact with one another)
3. Products (technology, music, art, food, literature, etc.; the things members of a group create, share, and transmit to the next generation).

While products may be easy to identify because we can often see, touch, taste, or hear them, perspectives and practices are not as easily recognized because they tend to be ingrained in a society. Brooks (1997) makes a distinction between “formal culture” (literature, fine arts, history, etc.) and “deep culture” (patterns of social interactions, values, attitudes, etc.). Like products in the 3P model, the elements of formal culture are easily observable across cultures. However, as the label suggests, elements of deep culture are often difficult to identify, as they tend to be value-based and deeply rooted in the psyches of individuals who make up a specific culture.

The Elements of Culture



A tool that can help EFL students conceptualize elements of culture is Edward T. Hall's (1976) “cultural iceberg” analogy. Hall developed the analogy to illustrate differences between what we readily see when we enter a new culture (the tip of the iceberg) and the imbedded aspects of the culture not readily visible (the submerged part of the iceberg). The products of a culture would be examples of things we can readily see—the surface culture— while cultural practices and social perspectives—the deep culture—that underlie the behavior of a specific culture are difficult to observe.

Using the iceberg analogy can be a fun way for students to think about elements of culture and make distinctions between those that are visible and those that may be so ingrained that members of a culture are not aware of them.

Examples of surface culture elements include food, national costumes, traditional music and dance, literature, and specific holidays. In the sub-surface culture section, students could list notions of courtesy, body language, gestures, touching, eye contact, personal space, facial expressions, conversational patterns, and the concept of time.

The Elements of Culture



Unconscious values and attitudes—the deep culture—may be the most difficult elements for students to identify. These can be so far ingrained that people feel these are simply the “right” and “normal” way of doing things. While it might seem odd for American parents to share their bed with their children, many cultures around the world view this as a normal practice. Other examples of unconscious values and attitudes relate to the nature of friendships, concepts of food, notions of modesty, concepts of cleanliness, gender roles, preferences for competition and cooperation, and so on. Again, the idea is to raise awareness of cultural elements in order to uncover the unique values and beliefs that explain why people behave differently.

These examples, while representing only a fraction of the elements of culture that would appear at each level, provide a starting point for students to think of their own ideas. After students have identified elements of culture from each level, they can brainstorm examples from their own culture. Teachers can refer to this exercise to contrast elements of the students’ native culture and elements of English-speaking cultures.