



Culture and the 'good teacher' in the English Language Classroom

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Introduction

- The issue of culture in ELT has been considered more in post-method situation due to the gap left by the retreat from methodology.

Therefore

Teachers have returned to center stage.

- “After 30 years in the ELT profession, I still do not know how to do my job.” Peter Grundy (1999)

- ❑ Many different new methods have appeared to offer an initial advantage over previous or current ones, however, none has finally achieved overwhelmingly better results.
- ❑ Methodological fatigue leads many to pragmatic conclusion that informed eclecticism offers the best approach for the future.

- While confidence in specific methods has declined, interest in individual learner differences, such as motivation, aptitude, family background, has noticeably increased.
- It is in conjunction with this shift of emphasis away from teaching and towards learning, that there has appeared a growing awareness of the role played by culture in the classroom.

A broad definition of culture

- ❑ Culture in the past: “Body of social, artistic, and intellectual traditions associated historically with a particular social, ethnic or national group.
- ❑ Holliday (1994) argues that the typical teacher in the expatriate teaching situation will be involved in a variety of cultures: *those of the nation, of the specific academic discipline, of international education, of the host institution, of the classroom, and of the students themselves.*

To be effective, expatriate teachers must take account of all these cultures and how they influence the attitude and study styles of their students instead of trying to impose cultures of their own.

His observation of local teachers in Egypt:
“the relationship between teacher and student seemed not so much a product of explicit methodology; it was rather derived more naturally from existing, unspoken role expectations, perhaps originating outside the classroom.”

The cultures of teachers

- ❑ Teachers need to be aware of the cultures that they bring to the classroom, whether they are nationals or expatriates (Foreigners).
- ❑ Woods (1996) refers to a teacher's 'BAK': their underlying **beliefs, assumptions, and knowledge.**

Woods mentions design and delivery:

- “When a [plan] is carried out, it is interpreted using familiar structures in a way which is coherent with the teacher’s BAK. By virtue of this interpretation, the actual curriculum—what happens to the learners in the classroom—is different from the planned curriculum”.
- Kramersch (1993): ‘If language is seen as a social practice, culture becomes the very core of language teaching’.

- There should exist a 'border zone' between the target language cultures and local cultures (by both teachers and learners), which all parties can meaningfully inhabit and within which everyone can interact on equal terms.
- Effective language learning will take place in this way, whatever the formal requirements of the syllabus, when teachers and learners 'are constantly engaged in creating a culture of a third kind through the give-and-take of classroom dialogue'.

□ **Canagarajah** argues that students and national teachers of English in 'periphery' countries should negotiate a new identity for themselves through the language, stamping their own identity on it and modifying it in accordance with their own needs and priorities.

The scope of inter-cultural communication training

- ❑ Concern for culture must predominate over concern for method, irrespective of what any official teaching syllabus might declare.
- ❑ This imperative places a huge burden on the shoulders of the teacher, who must cope with the multi-faceted challenge that it presents.

- In order to meet this challenge, courses have been developed to improve the intercultural communicative competence of both teachers and students.
- These courses aim to sensitize participants to the cultural issues involved in operating in a trans-cultural situation, and to equip them to meet the related challenges that they will face there.

- This process “involves an implicit and sometimes explicit questioning of the learner’s assumptions and values; and explicit questioning can lead to a critical stance, to “critical cultural awareness”(Byram and Fleming 1998).
- A good example here is Utley’s Intercultural Resource Pack (Utley 2004). This is a well-designed book which aims, in a convincing way, to promote cultural awareness and encourage self-reflection.

Guest's (2002) warns of the dangers inherent in trying to generalize superficially about other cultures: "much EFL cultural research has had the unfortunate result of misrepresenting foreign cultures by reinforcing stereotypes and constructing these cultures as monolithic, static 'Others', rather than as dynamic fluid entities."

❑ In fact, to develop familiarity with another culture, to improve one's real inter-cultural skills, it is necessary to live within that culture for a good period of time, to be what Byram (1997) terms a 'sojourner' rather than a tourist.

❑ You need to experience the culture from inside as 'an active participant in a community' (Barro et al. 1998).

- Byram identifies four main components of inter-cultural communicative competence: *knowledge, attitude, skills of interpretation and comparison, and skills of discovery and interaction.*
- While he admits that these ‘can in principle be acquired through experience and reflection, without the intervention of teachers and educational institutions’, he is nonetheless keen to promote their being taught in the classroom setting.

- ❑ In other words, they reflect who a person is, in terms of background, education, personality and experience, rather than what they can be trained to do in terms of discrete skills. This is true for both national and expatriate teachers.
- ❑ Professionals need some personal qualities in order to be able to navigate effectively: 'curiosity and openness, readiness to suspend disbelief about other cultures and beliefs about one's own' (Byram).

The profile of a 'good teacher'

- Appropriate personal qualities, therefore, are what count most in the development of good intercultural communicative competence.
- In fact, they are the key to overall success in the classroom, and this has not really changed over the years, although concern with the latest technique and method has tended to obscure this fact.

- 'Good Teacher', a well-rounded, confident and experienced individual, will be at ease in their classroom role; their teaching will be effective because it will be a natural product of who they are, and be received as such by their students.
- This is what Prabhu (1990) refers to as 'a teacher's sense of plausibility about teaching'.
- whether it is active, alive, or operational enough to create a sense of involvement for both the teacher and the student'. It is the exercise of these qualities which matters and gets results.

- Brumfit comments (1982) on the ideals of Humanistic Language Teaching, by saying that ‘successful affective teaching is more likely to emerge when students join a community in which they are provided with an example of the desired behavior pattern than when the patterns are built into some kind of syllabus structure’.
- In other words, success as a teacher does not depend on the approach or method that you follow so much as on your integrity as a person and the relationships that you are able to develop in the classroom.

The role of teacher development

- ❑ “Focusing more on the traditional idea of teacher training”
- ❑ If what I do in class depends mainly on who I am as a person, then I must develop myself as much as I can if I wish to improve as a teacher.
- ❑ Tsui (2003): the theorization of practical knowledge and the ‘practicalization’ of theoretical knowledge are two sides of the same coin in the development of expert knowledge. and they are both crucial to the development of expertise.

- ❑ Such reflection helps prevent that 'overroutinization' which Prabhu considers to be the pre-eminent 'enemy of good teaching'. It also helps the teacher develop an individual voice.
- ❑ The fact that the teacher is all-important means that reflection on our classroom activity must involve reflecting on ourselves.
- ❑ Such self-analysis can be hard because it may point towards changes which threaten our security and self-image.

Myers and Clark (2002) comment:

- ❑ “Our own concerns center round our own experience that CPD does not always produce related change in the workplace. Our own thinking is that most people have an assimilative. . . .mind-set to CPD. They see it in terms of accruing knowledge and skills rather than anticipating a deeper, accommodative sort of change that could lead to real change in their subsequent behavior.
- ❑ In order to overcome this barrier, self-exploration needs to be a central element of teacher development programmes, helping participants to progressively unpeel the various personal and cultural layers that they have accumulated.

The teacher in charge

- ❑ If we teach who we are, then teacher development really becomes a matter of self-development.
- ❑ If this is so, learning a musical instrument, having a child, or achieving a greater level of fitness, may be as relevant to your work as improving your technique at teaching grammar and vocabulary if the end result is to make you a more fulfilled, more confident, more interesting practitioner.
- ❑ The more we understand the world, human relations, and ourselves, the better able we will be to empathize with others and make connections.

- Expertise is not an abstract system of rules which can be absorbed and then enacted; it is a personal construct which is built up over a life time. It involves a dynamic relationship with the overlapping cultures and schemata within which the teaching takes place.

Tsui comments:

- “Teacher knowledge . . . should be understood in terms of the way they respond to their contexts of work, which shapes the way their knowledge is developed. This includes their interaction with the people in their contexts of work, where they constantly construct and reconstruct their understanding of their work as teachers.”

- Since teachers' lives are different one from another, so their expertise will differ, with no model emerging as an obvious template.
- What is right is what works in a given context in terms of all the various cultures which operate there, including those represented by the teacher.

- If we accept that our profession is an art rather than a science, and if we recognize that our personal qualities, attitudes, and experience are what finally count, providing that these are informed by acquaintance with best current practice and research, then
- *we language teachers can free ourselves from the kind of mechanistic expectations that have dogged us for so long.*

Therefore,

- ❑ Teachers become genuinely free agents, able to decide for their selves not only how best to carry out their jobs but also how to direct their future professional development.
- ❑ Student response and progress, which must be carefully evaluated, will provide the principal guidance here.
- ❑ ‘That is all we know in English language teaching, and all we need to know’.

Thank You!