

CULTURE AND PRAGMATICS IN LANGUAGE TEACHING AND LEARNING

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Key Questions:

- (1) What is the role of culture in language teaching and learning?
- (2) What is socio-cultural competence?
- (3) What are pragmatic norms of interaction?

Experience

An international student who majors in engineering drops by the engineering department office and asks the secretary: "Can you tell me where the English department is?" The secretary smiles and responds: "I don't know, actually. It's probably somewhere in the Humanities Building. Do you have a campus map?" The student turns around and leaves. The secretary is taken aback and feels slightly uncomfortable. She wonders why the student left so abruptly.

What Is Culture and What Is Its Role in Language Teaching and Learning?

Two parallel types of research have been carried out to identify the role of culture in society and its influence on human behavior. The research on culture as it applies to social norms, beliefs, assumptions, and value systems that affect many (if not most) human activities is carried out in the domains of ethnography, anthropology, sociology, and intercultural communication. In these disciplines, culture is examined in terms that apply to most human societies and organizations, and research on culture seeks to determine the similarities and differences that exist in human constructions of reality. Applied linguistics (and specifically,

socio-linguistics and pragmatics) is concerned with the inextricable connection between language and socio-cultural norms and frameworks and also seeks to identify patterns that can lead to an understanding of how members of particular cultures use language to refer to, describe, or function within social organizations. For example, politeness is considered to be a universal feature of language use in social organizations, but its pragmatic, linguistic, social, intentional, and conceptual realizations vary substantially across different languages and/or cultures. Even speakers of the same language or speakers of different dialects may belong to different sub-cultures and thus have different concepts of what it means to be polite and how politeness should be realized in speech and behavior.

In addition, research in ethnography, anthropology, and applied linguistics also includes studies of specific cultures, such as American, Chinese, Japanese, or Mexican (e.g., Saville-Troike, 2003; Scollon & Scollon, 2001; Stewart & Bennett, 1991). These studies identify and describe ways of doing, speaking, and behaving in specific cultural communities, without necessarily attempting to determine commonalities and differences among various cultures. Both research into culture in general and specific cultures in particular can be useful for L2 teachers who wish to allow learners to become more aware of the connection between the culture of the community and the language of its speakers. In language teaching and research on language, the term "culture" includes many different definitions and considerations that deal with forms of speech acts, socio-cultural behaviors, the rhetorical structure of text, and the ways in which knowledge is transmitted and obtained. Culture may find its manifestations in body language, gestures, concepts of time, hospitality customs, and even expressions of friendliness. While all these certainly reflect the cultural norms accepted in a particular society, the influence of culture on language use and concepts of how language can be taught and learned is both

broader and deeper. To a great extent, the culture into which one is socialized defines how an individual sees his or her place in society.

Although it is essential for learners to attain language proficiency to be linguistically competent, particularly in English as a Second Language (ESL) settings, language proficiency alone is not sufficient. On the whole, to become proficient and effective communicators, learners need to attain second language (L2) socio-cultural competence. Knowing how to say *thank you*, for example, does not automatically confer the knowledge of when to say *thank you*, how often to say *thank you*, and whether any additional action is called for. Quite reasonably, learners first tend to apply the standards that exist in the first or native language (L1) communities where they were socialized.

People who interact with ESL students have commented that some seem to express gratitude excessively for small considerations, even to the point of embarrassing the person they are speaking to. Others like the student in the initial example seem downright rude because they do not say *thank you* when expected to. If a receptionist at an office spends time and effort trying to help someone, but fails to provide concrete help, it is not obvious to the student that a *thank you* is warranted. After all, she did not provide any real assistance, and isn't it her job to try to help? However, if no thanks is given, the receptionist may not be very likely to even attempt to help this student in the future. Not understanding the socio-cultural expectations can negatively impact learners' ability to function in an L2 community.

In language teaching, focusing on the inextricable connections between a culture and its language uses should be a key characteristic of effective instruction in all language skills. At the present time, the ultimate goal of all cultural and cross-cultural education is to enable learners to become successful in an international community, a global economy, and across national

boundaries. Without instruction in and an understanding of L2 cultural and socio-pragmatic norms, learners by definition do not have and cannot make the essential choices needed to optimize their communicative competence.

Conceptual Underpinnings of Language Learning and Culture Learning

Among many other researchers, Hymes (1996) emphasizes that the learning of culture needs to be an integral part of language learning and education because culture crucially influences the values of the community, everyday interaction, the norms of speaking and behaving, and the socio-cultural expectations of an individual's roles. He further notes that those who do not follow the norms of appropriateness accepted in a community are often placed in a position that exacerbates social disparities and inequality.

Today, when the numbers of ESL and English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students have grown dramatically world-wide, it is becoming increasingly clear that the learning of a second culture does not take care of itself. Thus, L2 learners cannot always make the best of their educational, professional, and vocational opportunities unless they become familiar with fundamental L2 cultural concepts and constructs. Most importantly, an ability to recognize and employ culturally appropriate ways of communicating in speech or writing allows learners to make choices with regard to their linguistic, pragmatic, and other behaviors (Byram & Morgan, 1994; Hinkel, 1999).

Although traditionally courses and texts for language teachers concentrate on teaching L2 language skills, it may be difficult to separate the teaching and learning of English from the culture of its speakers. For example, what represents polite ways of speaking and the appropriate

ways of writing an essay depend on culturally-dependent concepts that are closely bound up with the language skills needed to speak or write well in the L2.

The Visible and the Invisible Culture

In L2 teaching, the term "culture" can and has been employed to refer to distinctly different domains of people's lives. It can be used to refer to the literature, the arts, the architecture, and the history of a particular people. When asked about their native culture, many L2 learners and ESL/EFL teachers alike would undertake to describe the history or the geography of their country because these represent a popular understanding of the term "culture." In addition, some definitions of culture can include the styles of dress, cuisine, customs, festivals, and other traditions. These aspects can be considered the *visible culture*, as they are readily apparent to anyone and can be discussed and explained relatively easily.

Yet, another far more complex meaning of culture refers to socio-cultural norms, worldviews, beliefs, assumptions, and value systems that find their way into practically all facets of language use, including the classroom, and language teaching and learning. The term *invisible culture* applies to socio-cultural beliefs and assumptions that most people are not even aware of and thus cannot examine intellectually. Scollon and Scollon (2001) state that the culturally-determined concepts of what is acceptable, appropriate, and expected behavior is acquired in the process of socialization and, hence, becomes inseparable from an individual's identity. For example, in the classroom, the roles of the student and the teacher are defined by the socio-cultural values of the larger community and the society. If students believe that the teacher is responsible for explaining the material and that speaking up in class is considered to be rude, presumptuous, and selfish, the fact that the teacher simply instructs students to participate

in discussions may do little to change learners' notions of what is appropriate and how they will be seen by others if they actually speak up in class. Most teachers, even those with minimal classroom experience or exposure, know how difficult it can be to convince some students to speak in front of their classmates, whereas other students may find it difficult to allow their classmates an opportunity to have their turn.

Why Second Culture Learning Is Complex

The complexity of teaching culture lies in the fact that most people engaged in cross-cultural interactions are not aware of the indelible impact of the invisible culture -- their own and that of other participants -- on practically all social uses of language. In language learning, culture does not represent a separate domain of L2 skills, such as speaking or writing; instead, the learning of the L2 culture and its many manifestations in, for example, speech and writing makes learners better communicators. In language teaching and learning, crucial socio-cultural principles determine the norms of appropriate language use and behavior within the frameworks of the society. These are likely to remain invisible unless they are taught and learned in conjunction with other language skills. As Stewart (1972) comments, "[t]he typical person has a strong sense of what the world is really like, so that it is with surprise that he discovers that 'reality' is built up out of certain assumptions commonly shared among members of the same culture. Cultural assumptions may be defined as abstract, organized, and general concepts which pervade a person's outlook and behavior" (p. 16). To members of a particular community and culture, these assumptions appear to be self-evident and axiomatic. On the other hand, they are not always shared by members of other cultures whose values are similarly based on unquestioned and unquestionable fundamental assumptions and concepts. It is also important to

note that ways of using language (e.g., speaking, listening, reading, and writing) and socio-cultural frameworks in different communities may conflict to varying degrees (Hinkel, 1999).

Learners' awareness of socio-cultural frameworks and the concepts they acquire as a part of their socialization into beliefs, assumptions, and behaviors remain predominantly first-culture bound even for advanced and proficient learners (Hinkel, 1999). Byram and Morgan (1994) point out that "[l]earners cannot simply shake off their own culture and step into another ... their culture is a part of themselves and created them as social beings ..." (p. 43).

Identifying Learners' Needs and Goals

There is little doubt that learners who live and/or study in English-speaking communities have a much greater need for developing their cultural competencies than those who study EFL as a part of their foreign language requirements. The learners' actual goals in attaining English proficiency may serve as guidelines for determining their needs in learning culture. In many settings, however, instruction highlighting the influence of culture on second language use can be made effective and productive when working on particular L2 tasks or activities.

Those learners who live, study, or work in English-speaking communities have a particularly acute need to become aware of how the use of English they are exposed to reflects the socio-cultural norms of the L2 community. For these individuals, a lack of language skill that prevents them from speaking, listening, reading, and writing according to the norms accepted in the community can be particularly costly and even damaging in terms of lost opportunities for better grades, jobs, professional and economic advancement, or even social relationships. In general terms, the purpose of teaching culture together with other language skills is to increase learners' interactional as well as linguistic competencies.

Teaching Cross-cultural Awareness in the Language Classroom

Because the culture of any community has many facets and manifestations, it would be practically impossible to deal with all of them in the classroom and prepare students for the many situations that they may encounter in the course of their functioning in ESL/EFL environments. However, many important aspects of teaching the second culture can be brought forth and addressed via classroom instruction, and some of these are exemplified below. The most important long-term benefits of culture teaching may be to provide learners with the awareness and the tools that would allow them an opportunity to achieve their academic, professional, social, and personal goals and become successful in their daily functioning in L2 (or EFL) environments.

Recent studies, as well as the experiences of teachers, have shown that L2 students in colleges and universities in the U.S., Canada, and other English-speaking countries do not always follow the norms of politeness and appropriateness commonly accepted in their L2 communities despite having lived in their L2 environments for several years (Hinkel, 1996; Hymes, 1996). Similarly, in their academic studies, L2 learners often experience difficulties because they do not always understand what is expected of them and do not have access to the necessary socio-cultural concepts that are ubiquitously manifested in the academy (Schleppegrell, 2004). For example, when university students are assigned to read material at home, many professors expect that the students will actually "master" the content and come to class prepared to discuss and apply it. L2 students are often seen as coming to class unprepared because they may not always understand that a relatively high degree of familiarity with the material is implicit when academic readings are assigned. To compound the problem, the

learners may have difficulty understanding the text, or they may be unwilling to participate in class discussions. In any of these situations, the instructor (and even the classmates) may form somewhat negative impressions of the non-native speakers' academic skills and preparation.

Causes and Outcomes of Socio-cultural Values

Because the socio-cultural norms of politeness, appropriateness, and propriety are acquired during socialization, in their daily interactions, learners are exposed only to the **outcomes** of linguistic and other types of behaviors and **not their causes**. For example, when their classmates are reluctant to share lecture or textbook notes, many learners simply conclude that their classmates may not like them and are unwilling to help them. However, the reluctance to share notes may stem from several socio-cultural constructs that are fundamental in many English-speaking communities: the value of intellectual property, self-reliance, and the right of an individual to refuse a request with which he or she is not comfortable. In addition, in many U.S. colleges and universities, students believe that they are expected to do their own work and are given credit based on their individual effort and achievement. However, in the situation above where the learner wants to borrow class notes, neither the ESL learner nor the classmate who has the notes may even question the reasons why the request was made and refused. In general terms, the "behavioral prescriptions," a term coined by Stewart (1972), are assumed to be known to most (if not all) socially competent adults and, hence, are rarely overtly discussed: A need for such a discussion would imply one's lack of basic and essential social competence.

The Importance of Noticing

In learning about the impact of socio-cultural norms on language use, the first step would be to understand that they exist in all languages, including learners' L1s. To become prepared for a practically infinite number of L2 interactions, learners need to become astute and consistent people-watchers. Building on their observations of their L1 socio-cultural norms and behaviors, the next task in culture learning is to separate individual behaviors from those that are culturally-determined. For example, repeated politeness routines, behaviors, and body language (e.g., eye contact) probably signal that these speech acts and behaviors are socio-culturally acceptable (and/or expected) in a particular community. Once learners notice a particular routine or behavior on several occasions from several different individuals, they can be asked to investigate its socio-cultural purposes and causes. An ability to identify the socio-cultural purposes of L2 communicative behaviors in a community allows learners to identify cultural patterns in situations, to understand how they are realized in other situations, and to anticipate their manifestations in the future.

The fundamental factors to consider in all interactions include: the genders of the speaker or the hearer, their respective ages, similarities or disparities in their social statuses (e.g., even if a professor wears blue jeans to class, it is not a good idea to pat him or her on the shoulder), the social distance between the speaker and the hearer (e.g., class friends, acquaintances, or strangers), the purposes of the speech events, the time available for the interaction, and its physical setting/location. In their investigations, learners should pay careful attention to politeness routines, expressions, and phrases that are employed by speakers or hearers, and then identify the reasons for the use of these language devices. For example, they could observe how a student asks the teacher to take a look at her paper (*Could you look at my*

paper and see if I am on the right track?). Were the participants in the interaction of the same age, gender, and social status? What politeness expressions did the speaker use? How did the hearer respond? Why did the hearer give this particular response? What politeness devices were used in the response and why?

Practice, Practice, Practice

The tasks associated with training learners to be careful and sharp people-watchers and observers of culturally-appropriate and common interactional routines and expressions can serve as a basis for very productive and effective activities that are interesting and enjoyable for learners. For intermediate ESL learners, a teacher may choose to make a basic checklist of linguistic and social features of speech events and interactions to encourage students to carry out their "field research" in cafeterias, restaurants, stores, and libraries. In EFL settings, a similar field study can take place in the students' L1 because the primary goal of this activity and of people-watching is to make learners aware of the linguistic and social factors that play a crucial role in interactions in any language or culture. In teaching EFL, the next step would be to compare the politeness and conversational routines in the learners' L1 to those found in English-language materials (e.g., movie clips, recorded audio and video interviews, taped dialogues that accompany many student texts, or perhaps even materials for standardized test preparation).

When working with high-intermediate or advanced ESL learners, teachers can make similar checklists for expanded and more sophisticated linguistic, social, and behavioral features of interactions, such as the location where the interaction takes place (e.g., an office, a hallway, a street), the availability of time (a scheduled appointment, a lunch hour, a break between classes), and/or the complexity of the task entailed in the speech act. In addition, students can be assigned

to investigate various types of speech acts, such as making appointments, seeking clarifications, or responding to requests, and even longer conversational exchanges (e.g., making small talk or negotiating the time and the place of meetings). High-intermediate and advanced EFL students can also participate in role-plays, short skits, or mini-plays, for which they write scripts to center on linguistic features of particular speech acts or types of conversational exchanges in their L2.

In addition to learning to note the linguistic and situational variables in interaction, it is important that learners focus on the socio-cultural features of speaking and behaving. In general, however, it would not be very comfortable or appropriate for interactants to become involved in discussing the reasons that a particular linguistic structure is used or a specific interactional behavior is displayed. To return to an earlier example, if the request for notes is refused, this may not be a good opportunity to ask why. However, at a later time, another individual, such as a different classmate, a roommate, or better yet, a teacher, can be asked to explain the socio-cultural causes for a particular behavior. Although many native speakers of English may not be aware of reasons for their own behaviors, they are usually aware of "behavioral prescriptions" in abstract terms. That is, most native speakers would be able to tell the difference between what is considered to be polite or even acceptable in a particular situation and, if asked, some may even be able say why some expression, phrase, or behavior would be perceived as more polite than another.

Teaching Culture as Pragmatics of Interaction

According to Celce-Murcia and Olshtain (2000), "pragmatics deals very explicitly with the study of relationships holding between linguistic forms and the human beings who use these forms" (p. 19). The authors go on to say that "As such, pragmatics is concerned with people's

intentions, assumptions, beliefs, goals, and the kind of actions they perform while using language. Pragmatics is also concerned with contexts, situations, and settings within which such language uses occur" (p. 19). In language learning and usage, pragmatic and cultural competence are closely related, and both require learners to "use language in socioculturally appropriate ways" (p. 20). One of the knottiest considerations in teaching L2 pragmatics is that socio-culturally and contextually appropriate (or inappropriate) communication can take a number of forms, e.g., there can be many pragmatically appropriate ways to ask for information or schedule an appointment.

In pragmatics, various sets of conventionalized, frequently repeated, and routinized expressions are called speech acts. These are typically classified by their pragmatic and communicative functions, such as requests, apologies, compliments, complaints, etc. Speech acts can be direct or indirect, and thus vary in the degree of their politeness or even comprehensibility. For example, upon hearing "Can you help me with this problem?" an interlocutor might respond, "I'm a little busy right now." This response is an indirect speech act, and it can mean, for example, that the speaker is in a hurry and does not have much time available. However, if the hearer does not fully grasp the pragmatic function of this speech act as a refusal, then the speaker's communicative goal may not be achieved. As Celce-Murcia & Olshtain (2000) note, the pragmatic context is crucial for the speaker's meaning to be understood.

Much research carried out in pragmatics and sociolinguistics over the past several decades has focused on the socio-cultural norms of politeness and appropriateness in performing various types of speech acts. The linguistic and socio-pragmatic forms of specific speech acts can be taught in the classroom to focus on routine and conventionalized uses of language in context. The contextual factors that invariably affect speech act realization and interpretation

include, as mentioned, the social status of the speaker and the hearer, social distance between them, their ages, genders, and the situation where the interaction takes place (Celce-Murcia & Olshtain, 2000).

Most importantly, the key to productive teaching of culture and pragmatics is to provide learners with the tools to enable them to become aware of the sociolinguistic norms reflected in the ways of speaking in the target community. Thomas (1983) explains that violations of pragmatic and cultural norms of appropriateness in interactions often lead to sociopragmatic failure, uncomfortable breakdowns in communication, and the stereotyping of non-native speakers. She notes that when many L2 learners display inappropriate language behaviors, they are often not even aware that they have done so. The teaching of interactional pragmatics in the L2 has to include developing learners' heightened awareness of the socio-pragmatic features of interaction so as to provide them with appropriate choices.

Socio-cultural Variables in Interaction

In the teaching of L2 speaking and pragmatics, two overarching goals lie at the focus of instruction. The **pragmatic function** (i.e., the socio-cultural purpose/goal) of speech acts, such as requests, apologies, compliments, and complaints, can be found in practically every curriculum for teaching speaking skills. The **linguistic form** of speech acts and conversational routines is one of the most easily accessible and ubiquitous areas of teaching L2 speaking, e.g., *Give me a penny* vs. *Could you/would you give me a penny?* or *Do you have a penny?*. The pragmatic function of these expressions is the same (i.e., request), but the speaker's choice of form may elicit different responses from the hearer. For example, to increase learners' linguistic repertoire, the majority of ESL/EFL textbooks for teaching speaking devote a great deal of

attention to the forms of polite and casual expressions, idioms, and short dialogues, and even their appropriate pronunciation and intonation because, for instance, transfer of intonation from L1 to L2 can have very subtle negative consequences for interaction.

What makes a particular expression or speech act situationally appropriate is not so much the linguistic form or the range of the L2 speakers' linguistic repertoire, but the socio-cultural variables, which are rarely addressed in explicit instruction. Partly for this reason, it is not uncommon to hear learners say *How's it going*, *What's up*, or *Later* to peers, teachers/professors, and even principals/university deans. As Celce-Murcia and Olshtain (2000) point out, "pragmatics studies the context within which an interaction occurs as well as the intention of the language user. Who are the addressees, what is the relation between speakers/writers and hearers/readers, when and where does the speech even occur? ..." (p. 20).

Socio-culturally inappropriate greetings and conversational closures, as well as other speech acts mentioned in the earlier examples, are likely to raise an eyebrow or two, but, as has been noted, their impropriety has little chance of being overtly discussed, and thus, the learning value of the experience may be lost. The socio-cultural variables and pragmatic forms that can make a perfectly acceptable expression unacceptable in different interactions or settings reflect the invisible aspects of L1 or L2 culture that do not easily lend themselves to textbook exercises or listings of expressions. Nonetheless, it is the socio-cultural features, such as gender, age, and the social status of the participants in the interaction, as well as the misuses of pragmatic functions and linguistic forms, that can lead to pragmatic failure (Thomas, 1983).

For example, a lesson on conversation openers is very common and can be found in many ESL/EFL textbooks. Usually, most lessons (or textbook chapters) start with a few models: *Good morning/afternoon. How are you (today/this evening)?, How is it/ everything going?,*

What's up?, *How are you doing?*, *How do you like this weather/Isn't this weather wonderful/terrible?*, or *How do you like this city?*. Few of these resources, however, distinguish between the pragmatic forms that are appropriate in peer-level interactions and those that should be used in conversational exchanges with hearers who have a different social status. Furthermore, in such examples, the contextual variables are rarely taken into account: while it is very appropriate to open a conversation with a brief mention of the weather with an acquaintance in the cafeteria, it may not be a good opener when asking a bank teller to cash a check or a bus driver for route details. Similarly, *What's up?*, and *How's it going?* are used almost exclusively in short and casual encounters with friends, but they do not seem to be the best options when talking to a waiter, a store clerk, a receptionist in an office, or a doctor.

One activity for developing learners' awareness of the **variability** of politeness and appropriateness in interactions with different types of hearers and situations in which various conversational openers are used is to conduct field observations and experiments. In an experiment to determine the socio-pragmatic and contextual appropriateness of a speech act, L2 learners can ask their native speaker friends or roommates to evaluate the degree of politeness entailed in each of the conversational openers and explain the factors that make one expression "softer" or more appropriate than another. For example, which expression seems more polite, *I want to make an appointment for 3 o'clock*, *I would like to make an appointment for 3 o'clock*, *May/Could I make an appointment for 3 o'clock?* or *Would it be okay for me to make an appointment for 3 o'clock?* What are the specific words and/or constructions that make one expression more polite than the other? Why is the question form used in two of these? Are there situations in which the least polite expression can be used? Who are the people (the speaker and the hearer) in these situations, and do they have equivalent social positions? The results of such

experiments can be discussed in pairs or small groups so that with the teacher's guidance students are able to identify the linguistic, pragmatic, and situational features of language that come into play in conversational exchanges.

The Pragmatic Force and the Linguistic Form

Another important characteristic of real-life interactions is determining the **pragmatic force** (i.e., interactional/conversational purpose) of expressions used in daily interactions. For example, *How are you (today/this morning)?* or *How is it going?* are not intended to be real questions or conversation openers. Rather, their pragmatic force is to be a greeting to signal to hearers that they are recognized and acknowledged. As an outcome, these formulaic expressions do not require a response, beyond the formulaic (*Fine, Great, Good, OK*). On the other hand, these expressions contrast with *How have you been?* or *How is everything/this term/your class going?*. Because the linguistic form of formulaic expressions, such as *How are you?* and *How have you been (lately)?* is similar, many learners interpret their pragmatic force to be equivalent, as well. Setting up field research or experiments to be carried out by pairs or small groups of students in order to investigate the varying pragmatic force of such expressions can be very beneficial in making them aware of the divergences between the form and the conversational intent of pragmatic routines in English. Other such investigations can include a great number of formulaic conversational expressions and exchanges, in which the pragmatic force may be difficult for learners to determine and which is not always apparent from their linguistic form and content, e.g., *Call me some time* vs. *Call me on Tuesday*; *Let's get together/have lunch sometime* vs. *Let's get together/have lunch on Friday*; *Call me if you have any questions* vs. *Call me any time*; *Do you have any questions?* (it is now time to ask questions, if you have them); *I'll*

be happy to answer all your questions during the office hours (i.e., please do not ask me any questions now but come to my office at the designated time); *You paper needs a little work* (this expression does not mean necessarily that the paper needs only a little bit of work to be improved); *Maybe, you need to spend more time on your homework* (does not mean that spending more time without greater effort would result in better grades).

Many conversational routines are closely tied to the pragmatic and socio-cultural variables that affect the interactional effect of an expression or routine, and these can be taught to learners at practically all levels of proficiency, from beginning to highly advanced. For example, when and to whom to say *thank you* can be taught at the beginning level. In EFL settings, to raise learners' awareness of the important socio-cultural dimensions of conversations, students can be asked to gather similar information in their native language. In pairs or small group discussions, learners can determine what characteristics of language (e.g., the pragmatic and linguistic form, stress, or tone) make one expression more polite than another. Then learners can be taught to identify parallel (but not necessarily similar) L2 features that can make a difference in the appropriateness of L2 conversational expressions and routines.

The Socio-cultural Construction of Writing and Literacy

In English, what is appropriate and inappropriate in academic written discourse is highly conventionalized (Swales, 1990). In practically all ESL programs in colleges and universities in English-speaking countries, a great deal of attention, time, and resources are devoted to the teaching of academic writing. L2 writing instruction focuses on such fundamental features of written academic discourse as the organization (e.g., introduction, body, conclusion, and other discourse moves), the presence and the placement of the thesis statement, the structure of the

paragraph (e.g., the topic sentence), the rhetorical support for the thesis included in every paragraph, and an avoidance of needless digressions, repetition, and redundancy, among many other factors. The reason that these features of academic writing need to be explicitly and persistently taught to ESL/EFL students is that they represent conventionalized (and prescribed) characteristics of the academic genre that are not necessarily found in written discourse in rhetorical traditions other than the Anglo-American one. For example, educated L2 learners who were socialized in other rhetorical traditions are rarely aware that a clear thesis statement should be placed close to the beginning of one's essay. Similarly, various socio-cultural concepts and prescriptive behaviors play an important role in determining what can or cannot be included in academic discourse or even what can or cannot be discussed in an academic essay. For example, discussions of family disagreements, one's religious beliefs or political views, or ethnocentric attitudes is considered unacceptable in academic writing; on the other hand, descriptions of travels and vacations, celebrations of holidays and traditions, music, or literature are common and very appropriate in academic contexts.

In writing instruction, learners are typically presented with models and examples of paragraphs and essays to demonstrate the discourse paradigms commonly accepted in Anglo-American writing. However, as many teachers know from experience, learning to write in accordance with the rhetorical forms and norms expected in English academic discourse can be a difficult and tedious process. L1 socialization regarding written discourse paradigms usually has so much influence on learning to write in an L2 that often, even with explicit instruction, learners are not always able to recognize the rhetorical features of L2 discourse, much less produce them (Hinkel, 1994). In addition, however, as in most L2 interactions and communications, in the

course of writing instruction, learners are faced with the outcomes, and not the causes, of the socio-cultural norms and conventions prevalent in a second culture, which makes it harder for them to understand and apply what they are instructed to do. For example, *why should the thesis statement be placed at the beginning of an essay if I know that it should be in the conclusion or why does the teacher say that this example is not clear when I think that it is very clear?* In many human societies, writing and literacy represent one of the most highly valued and prized domains of socialization and education. For this reason, many L2 learners may initially choose to adhere to the discourse frameworks they acquired in their L1 literacy socialization and the value associated with the appropriateness of writing in a particular way.

For example, in English, speakers are expected to present their points in a manner that is more direct than that which is common among speakers of many other languages (Scollon & Scollon, 2001). In particular, in many cultures, one is required to engage in social conversations to establish a relationship before making one's purpose known. The main point of a conversation comes closer to the end of discourse. Similarly, in various rhetorical traditions, the main point of the piece of writing usually does not come until the end because the writer needs to lead the reader gently to the conclusion, which is expected to be clear and obvious by the time it is stated at the end (or sometimes, it is not even stated at all). If in speaking, vague and indirect hints are considered to be more socially acceptable, in writing, stating one's point directly and early may also be viewed as presumptuous and excessively forward. On the other hand, in the Anglo-American rhetorical tradition, it is important that the main idea or the purpose for writing is stated at the outset, and writers undertake to support their thesis with additional information, intended to validate their main points.

In the teaching of L2 writing, teachers may draw on many examples from speaking and establish parallels to help learners develop cultural awareness in language use. One of the typical problems in the teaching of writing in English is that learners often do not provide a sufficient amount of support and detail in their writing to make their points meaningful and convincing. In many cultures other than Anglo-American, the right to speak is considered to be the prerogative of those who have the authority to speak. Similarly, in writing, learners often believe that detailed support is excessive and unnecessary because readers are not really concerned with trivial descriptions. They may also think that they have little of value to say and that providing too much detail implies a lack of humility. To help learners take a different view of the necessary detailed support expected in L2 writing, teachers may need to provide explicit instruction on L2 reader expectations, the value of explicit explanations in the Anglo-American rhetorical tradition, and their uses in writing.

Cultural Load in Reading Textbooks and Authentic Texts

In teaching reading, by and large, two main types of materials are employed: highly-controlled and often simplified readings from textbooks, on the one hand, and authentic materials that vary in their level of difficulty, on the other. The materials from textbooks are most often used to develop learners' reading tactics and strategies and to improve their vocabulary base. In contrast, authentic texts can include a great variety of genres, such as introductory and advanced textbooks, scholarly articles, print media publications on hobbies, health, politics, sports, how-to-books, and literature for readers of all ages (see Celce-Murcia & Olshtain, 2005, for a thorough discussion). Because ESL/EFL textbooks present a limited and controlled range of ideas, vocabulary items, and culturally-dependent concepts, they may not be the best means of

explaining how the second culture affects language use. However, even within the limited thematic and lexical scope of textbook readings, learners may encounter comprehension difficulties that have to do with culture because cultural inferences often need to be made to understand text (and context).

Culture teaching in L2 reading goes far beyond instruction on vocabulary, idioms, and collocations, all of which are essential for understanding the meaning of the text. In addition, context- and culture-specific connotations and implications of word and phrase meanings also need to be addressed. More urgently, however, socio-cultural meanings and values greatly affect a learner's ability to comprehend text and the context in which it is employed. In the teaching of authentic texts, such as those excerpted from advanced print media (e.g., news magazines and literature), culture-specific references, allusions, metaphors, and symbolism play a prominent role. However, instructing learners to rely on their background knowledge and experience is not always productive or helpful.

In language teaching, it is relatively easy to obtain diverse types of reading materials, and gradually increase the degree of their cultural and linguistic complexity. Most importantly, however, the teaching of culture and its impact on text comprehension needs to be addressed at all levels of proficiency to build learners' awareness of cultural implications and references, without which few texts can be understood. For advanced learners, materials on popular hobbies, science, and even excerpts from introductory college texts can provide a relatively smooth transition to more complex readings such as authentic literature. For ESL/EFL purposes, literature should be chosen carefully to allow learners an opportunity to comprehend the text and enjoy it. However, the amount of work expended on pre-reading and preparing learners for reading literature may be sufficiently great for teachers to weigh its benefits relative to the cost

(Birch, 2006). In EFL environments, in addition to textbooks, materials from many Internet sites, English-language newspapers or free brochures for tourism and travel can provide access to texts that contain fewer culture-bound and advanced metaphors and allusions because they are oriented for readers in various geographic locations and of varied language skills. Such materials allow the teacher to concentrate on culture-specific references and socio-cultural values invariably present in most texts, but they may not become so numerous and complex that learners are unable to comprehend the reading material.

In general terms, readings selected for culture and L2 teaching combined can be effective in various ways and examined for discourse and text organization, cultural concepts, vocabulary, grammar, and the conventions of writing in English. The readings can be relatively easily selected to be appropriate for various levels of reading proficiency and the range of attendant L2 skills. It is important, however, not to miss an opportunity to engage learners in a discussion of how culture impacts language use across skills.

Classroom Applications

Because manifestations of the influence of culture on language use are very common, activities and materials for teaching cultural concepts and implications are relatively easy to create. The following ideas for teaching L2 socio-cultural and pragmatic concepts and their outcomes are just some suggestions. All these have been used for years with many different groups of learners in teaching ESL or EFL. Extensive culture-teaching projects and activities presented below may be adapted to a variety of contexts, and teachers can choose to use only portions of them, which include isolable steps.

(1) In teaching ESL, one of the most effective activities that can be used for investigating L2 socio-cultural norms and pragmatic linguistic forms are interviews of native speakers or experienced L2 users because they provide real-life testimonials and evidence that comes from real people (instead of teachers or textbooks). The greatest advantage in conducting interviews is that they allow learners to practice a variety of L2 skills in tandem, and several productive assignments can be derived from them.

The first step is for learners to develop appropriate and focused questions. These can provide a fruitful avenue for working on various forms of polite speech acts, considerations of appropriateness (e.g., what represents personal information, what topics can be discussed, and how to approach them), as well as pragmatic forms of questions and requests. The questions should focus on the causal information that deals with L2 cultural concepts and socio-cultural norms and behaviors that cannot be readily observed. Interviews allow learners access to the invisible aspects of L2 culture. Examples of questions can include:

- Why do people ask you *How are you* and then not listen to the answer?
- Why do teachers say that students have to come on time if when students come late, they know that the missed material is their own loss?
- Why do Americans smile so much?
- When and why is it okay to call teachers/professors by their first names?
- Why do strangers say *hello* to me on the street?
- Why is it necessary to explain everything in so much detail in writing, or if my essay explains everything (!), wouldn't readers think that I view them as a little slow?

It is strongly recommended that the instructor approve the questions before the actual interview.

In addition, learners can work at eliciting the polite and appropriate requests for appointments/meetings, "softening" devices (e.g. *maybe, possibly, or can/could*), appropriate telephone or email skills, negotiating the times and places for meeting, and seeking clarification.

The interviews can be conducted in pairs, but it is preferable not to include more than two students in an interviewing team.

Following the interview, the information can be used for a presentation to other small groups of students or to an entire class. In a writing class, the outcomes can be turned into a short or long paper, depending on the learners' level of L2 proficiency. In any case, however, the presentations or written assignments should not turn into mere descriptions of responses or behaviors but should set out to determine their causes. When working on the presentation or writing assignments, the cultural conventions of L2 public speaking (e.g., eye contact, the organization of content, and demeanor) or L2 written discourse (e.g., the thesis statement, topic sentences, and their detailed support) can be addressed in conjunction with the work on the assignment content. In general, such a project can take approximately two or three weeks, depending on circumstances.

(2) In EFL settings, learners can work on short questionnaires that also have the goal of identifying the manifestations of culture in language use and heightening learners' awareness of politeness norms, socio-cultural variables, pragmatic functions, and linguistic forms of speech acts (e.g., the types of "softening" devices and their variability) in their first language. The questionnaires can be administered in the learners' L1 to gather information that can be later used in L2 presentations or written assignments. The tasks can be simplified for intermediate level learners or be made more complex for advanced L2 speakers.

(3) In ESL/EFL, home videos, movie clips, and videotaped excerpts from newscasts and TV programs (e.g., sitcoms, shows for younger learners, or interviews) can provide a practically inexhaustible resource for examining the influence of culture on language (e.g., routinized expressions, "softening" devices, questions, requests, etc.), interactional practices, body

language, turn taking, and the length of pauses to signal the end of a turn. The information on socio-cultural and politeness norms of the community obtained from such materials can be used in subsequent role-plays, skits, or short plays that learners can script and present, as well as formal presentations and writing assignments. In this case, written assignments can include the aspects of L2 speech acts and behaviors that learners found surprising, the descriptions of polite and routinized expressions that they noted, and culturally-determined conventions displayed in the video excerpts. These projects can be worked on from one to two weeks, depending on the amount of the material used in the video-lesson.

Teacher, Teach Yourself

Because individuals are socialized into their first culture, they are usually unaware of the influence of culture on language. To become effective, classroom teachers are often faced with the need to develop their professional knowledge of the fundamental socio-cultural variables essential for L2 teaching. A great deal of literature has been published since the 1980s and 1990s on the impact of cultural awareness and knowledge on the overall language proficiency of learners. In addition, it has become apparent that cultural concepts affect how learners learn and teachers teach. Teaching adult learners to be or speak "like a native" (Saville-Troike, 2003, p. 31) is not likely to result in success because socio-cultural norms of language use are acquired during the socialization process. Thus, classroom teachers need to advance their own knowledge of how learners' first cultures work and how it impacts their ability to learn. For example, why is it that some students rarely speak in class, why do some learners memorize whole chapters instead of trying to "understand" the material, or why do some people never ask questions even if they need the teacher to provide more explanation?

To develop effectiveness and a sufficient knowledge base **about** learners' cultures does not mean that a teacher needs to become an expert ethnographer on fifteen different cultures, represented in the classroom. For instance, the teacher does not necessarily need to be concerned with the roles and responsibilities of children and parents, religious rituals, or ways to celebrate holidays and life-cycle events, such as weddings and funerals. The ESL/EFL teacher is primarily concerned with cultural considerations that have a direct impact on his or her students' ability to learn and to do their best in a second language and in a second culture environment. If students from a particular culture (or several cultures) do not participate in a speaking activity, it would be interesting to find out why this is so. On the other hand, if members of another culture seem to dominate most classroom interactions, it may be necessary to learn why they behave in this way, if the teacher is seeking to make the classroom a productive learning place for all students.

Thus, teachers' first priority is to identify their own needs in culture learning, in addition to those of their students. Another consideration is to investigate how teachers' own socio-culturally-determined beliefs, assumptions, and expectations affect their views on student learning and behaviors. For example, if a student does not want to speak up, the teacher may respectfully allow the student to maintain silence for the duration of the class or take appropriate steps to make it more comfortable for all students to volunteer opinions in paired or small-group activities or other settings that are less threatening than speaking in front of the entire class. If, however, the student maintains polite silence and the teacher accommodates the student's choice of behaviors, the student is unlikely to improve his or her speaking proficiency and fluency. (See also Murphy, this volume.)

Making Choices

As with most L2 skills, such as reading and writing, teachers often need to develop their own approach to teaching L2 culture and pragmatics. One of the central objectives in developing effectiveness in socio-pragmatic instruction is to address the **causal knowledge about culture** (Buttjes & Byram, 1991) and **socio-cultural reasoning** that underlies practically all culturally-determined ways of doing. Examining the causes that lead members of a particular culture to do something in a particular way helps learners make choices in speaking, writing, and behaving. For example, in many English-speaking communities, students are expected to arrive to class on time or arrive at an appointment on time. On the other hand, such an expectation may not be common in other cultures. The reason that students need to be punctual is that in English-speaking cultures, the value of time is very high, and it is considered to be a scarce and important commodity, similar to money. In fact, a number of sayings refer to time in ways similar to money (e.g., *spend time*, *waste time*, *to be short on time*, *time is money*). Therefore, when students arrive late, they disrupt the class, *take* other people's *time*, and display a certain amount of disrespect for the teacher and other students. Students make a choice whether to come on time or to take the liberty of coming late. To help learners make appropriate choices (or to make them aware that they are indeed making choices with consequences), teachers need to develop their cultural knowledge and classroom effectiveness in dealing with culturally-based problems.

Future Trends: Teaching and Learning about L2 Culture and Pragmatics

In the contemporary world, English predominates as a means of international communication. It is the language of technology, popular media and culture, business, and science. Intercultural interactions among speakers of many languages and members of many

societies often take place in English. This does not necessarily imply, however, that learners and users of English as a medium of wider communication are obliged to follow Anglo-American socio-cultural and pragmatic norms of interaction. For instance, in an L2 English communication between, for example, a speaker of a Central European language and a speaker of an Asian language, where both are non-native users of English, it does not seem reasonable to expect that they would attempt to follow Anglo-American socio-cultural norms of politeness. However, learning about another culture and its social norms has already become more important in today's world, which keeps growing progressively smaller.

The dramatic advancement of technology, rapid transmission of spoken and written language, and the expansion of English language teaching world-wide will continue to increase the ubiquity of cross-cultural interactions. In real-life interactions among speakers of various languages, including English, developing cross-cultural proficiency and familiarity with pragmatic norms of communication is likely to become a daily necessity on a par with other linguistic skills. As has been mentioned earlier, both linguistic and socio-cultural proficiencies are essential for a successful communication to take place. In this light, teaching the language and the culture of speakers of the target language will probably become progressively more interdependent.

Conclusion

It is important for both teachers and learners to be aware of the manifestations and outcomes of L2 socio-cultural values, concepts, and pragmatic norms on people's language usage. To this end, learners need to be taught to notice polite (and often routinized) expressions and behaviors common in the L2 community because without becoming astute people-watchers,

it may be difficult, if not impossible, to become interactionally competent in the L2. Being aware of the socio-cultural frameworks and the pragmatic features of language does not mean that learners have to become "native-like." However, an awareness of the L2 socio-cultural and pragmatic norms can allow learners to make their own informed choices of what to say and how to say it. The teacher's task is to provide learners the tools that they need to recognize that they are indeed making choices.

Although ESL/EFL teachers devote a great deal of work, time, and attention to the teaching of L2 linguistic skills, being linguistically competent is not enough for many learners to attain their educational, professional, and social goals. Because language use reflects the culture of its speakers, the teaching of L2 culture can be bound up with the teaching of most L2 language skills. Teaching L2 culture together with strategies for noticing while learners are speaking, listening, reading, and writing more adequately represents the connections between language and culture than teaching L2 language skills -- or culture -- in isolation.

Chapter Summary

- In L2 teaching and learning, the term "culture" can be used to refer to very different domains of human societies: (1) literature, the arts, architecture, festivals, and history; or (2) socio-cultural norms, worldviews, beliefs, assumptions, and value systems that can be identified in practically all language usage. Language teaching should focus on the latter.
- Teaching and learning a second culture does not represent a separate domain of L2 usage or instruction, but learning to follow L2 socio-cultural norms makes learners better and more proficient communicators in a range of other skills, such as speaking, reading, or writing.

- L2 pragmatics deals with a crucial area in culture teaching and learning because it addresses intentions, assumptions, beliefs, goals, and actions that people perform by means of language in socio-culturally appropriate ways.
- The most important long-term benefit of culture teaching is to provide learners with the awareness and tools that allow them an opportunity to achieve their academic, professional, social, and personal goals and to succeed in their daily L2 interactions.
- L2 teachers' primary focus is to work with the cultural aspects and pragmatic uses of language that have a direct impact on students' ability to learn and to do their best in L2 communications.
- A central objective of effective L2 socio-pragmatic instruction is to address the causal knowledge about culture (why people do something in a particular way) and socio-cultural reasoning that underlies practically all culturally-determined ways of doing.

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Discussion Questions

- (1) The chapter mentions that culture teaching does not represent a separate domain of L2 teaching. If this is so, is it useful for teachers to develop lessons to deal with folk dances, festivals, facts, and foods when teaching culture?
- (2) The distinction between the visible and the invisible culture is described as one of the most important aspects of teaching the influence of culture on L2 use. What are the key features of the invisible culture and what impact do they have on L2 learning and use?
- (3) Why does the teaching of L2 culture seem to be more directly relevant to ESL rather than to EFL learners? Why is contrasting culturally-determined ways of speaking and writing useful for teaching second culture to EFL learners?
- (4) In many ways, cultural references are closely intertwined with reading, discourse, and text. What is the role of linguistic proficiency and cultural proficiency in ESL/EFL reading and/or writing? How important can L1 literacy be in learning to read and write in ESL/EFL?
- (5) Why is it that many teacher-training programs stay away from preparing teachers to work with second culture? If you were in charge of an ESL/EFL program would you choose include the teaching of culture as a component of teacher training? Why or why not?

Suggested Activities

- (1) Create lists of common linguistic expressions or behaviors, each associated with two or three types of speech acts (agreeing, disagreeing, inviting someone to do something or visit, and/or accepting or declining invitations) and arrange them from the least to the most polite

expressions. What are the characteristics of the least or the most polite speech acts? What are the socio-cultural variables that would make each of them acceptable or unacceptable in real-life interactions?

- (2) Various types of writing genres require the uses of different conventions. Gather samples of different texts to include, for example, a personal letter, an email message, a blog posting, a popular magazine article, an excerpt from an introductory textbook, or a formal essay/academic paper. Identify the features of these texts that make them different in important ways. What are the culturally-prescribed conventions common in personal, expressive, or formal academic writing? What do these genres share? What do the shared and different conventions say about the culture of the L2 community?
- (3) Observe a group of people who are engaged in a similar activity at the same time (e.g., standing in line, waiting for the teacher to arrive in class, or making small purchases in a drugstore). What do the verbal and nonverbal behaviors of these individuals have in common? How do they, for instance, maintain eye contact or hold their hands? What do most of them say and what do only some individuals say? How can culturally-determined causes of ways of behaving and speaking in a community be identified and isolated from those that are based on individual choices?
- (4) To find out what represents a popular understanding of culture in the community, find five or six individuals in a similar age group and with similar social status who are native speakers of the same language and then ask them to tell you about their culture. For example, ask several American or Japanese students to tell you about their culture. What do their responses include? How do these individuals identify the visible and the invisible aspects of their culture?

Suggestions for Further Reading

LoCastro, V. (2011). *Pragmatics for language educators: A sociolinguistic perspective*. New York, NY: Routledge.

Presents pragmatics as the study of language use in real-life social interaction and describes the effects of various language forms on communication. Concentrates on everyday conversation and the socio-cultural variables that determine choices of language features made by interaction participants.

Saville-Troike, M. (2003). *The ethnography of communication: An introduction* (3rd ed.). Malden, MA: Blackwell.

Describes how and why language is used in particular ways that vary in different cultures. Illustrates essential concepts in sociolinguistics and cites examples from many languages to outline frameworks of communication and cultural competence.

Scollon, R., & Scollon, S.W. (2001). *Intercultural communication* (2nd ed.). Oxford, UK: Blackwell.

A practical guide to the main concepts and problems of intercultural communication. Centers on principles of interactive sociolinguistics, the discourse of members of divergent cultures, pragmatics, and ethnography. Underscores the importance of language use in cross-cultural discourse and cultural norms of interaction.

Stewart, E. & M. Bennett. (1991). *American cultural patterns: A cross-cultural perspective*. Revised edition. Yarmouth, ME: Intercultural Press.

Discusses fundamental concepts of American culture in terms of similar or different characteristics of other cultures. Also focuses on the impact of culture on communication and implications for cross-cultural interactions.

Links

<http://www.cal.org/resources/digest/0309peterson.html>

A digest on Culture in Second Language Teaching commissioned by Center for Applied Linguistics. Presents a number of principles, techniques, and activities for teaching culture in the context of second language instruction.

<http://www.ncrel.org/sdrs/areas/issues/content/cntareas/reading/li7lk12.htm>

An overview of teaching and learning a second culture in the context of language learning, issued by the North Central Regional Education Laboratory. Focuses on how children learn to read in a second language and cultural implications of second language literacy in education and daily life.

http://esl.about.com/od/esleflteachingtechnique/a/culture_dif.htm

An article that highlights important cultural differences in teaching English cross-culturally, in the About.com series. Emphasizes the fact that teachers' own socialization and cultural views affect the values they place on various language skills and teaching foci.

<http://www.teachingenglish.org.uk/think/articles/culture-fifth-language-skill>

An article that focuses on the place and importance of culture in language teaching, sponsored by the British Council and BBC, in the TeachingEnglish series. Covers specifically the development of Cultural Knowledge, Cultural Values, Cultural Behavior, and Cultural Skills.

Author Bio

Eli Hinkel teaches linguistics and applied linguistics at Seattle University. She has taught ESL and applied linguistics, as well as trained teachers, for more than 30 years, and she has published

numerous books and articles on learning a second culture, and second language grammar, writing, and pragmatics in such journals as TESOL Quarterly, Applied Linguistics, Journal of Pragmatics, and Language Teaching Research. Her books include *Culture in Second Language Teaching and Learning*, *New Perspectives on Grammar Teaching*, *Second Language Writers' Text*, *Teaching Academic ESL Writing*, *Handbook of Research in Second Language Teaching and Learning, Volumes 1 and 2*, and *Effective Curriculum for Teaching Second Language Writing* (in press). She is also the editor of the ESL & Applied Linguistics Professional Series of books and textbooks for teachers and graduate students, published by Routledge.

Glossary

cultural values	ideas, world-views, attitudes, opinions, principles, and knowledge shared by members of a particular society, and not necessarily shared or understood by members of other societies
politeness	culturally-determined linguistic and other types of behavior that have the goal of accommodating the other person's values and social disposition
pragmatics	a subdiscipline of linguistics that studies how context contributes to meaning, e.g., interaction participants' intentions, social status, social distance, age, and gender of interaction participants, and setting
pragmatic function	the meaning -- or social purpose -- of an expression, word, phrase, or sentence in actual spoken or written communication, e.g., <i>how are you</i> typically functions as a greeting
social distance	a degree of familiarity or closeness between the speaker and the hearer
socialization	or enculturation -- a complex and ongoing process whereby an individual acquires social skills and learns the norms, attitudes, values, and behavior that are needed to participate within a particular culture
socio-cultural competence	knowledge, skills, and functional abilities that are associated with values, beliefs, norms, and behavior of a particular society and in the context of daily communication and social interaction, i.e., knowing how to speak and behave appropriately
speech acts	conventionalized, frequently repeated, and routinized expressions, classified by their communicative and pragmatic functions, such as requests, apologies, compliments, or complaints