

# **The Teaching of Culture in General English (EFL) Programs in South East Asian Countries**

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## **Culture and Language Shock**

Le (2002) maintains that it is not possible to separate language from its culture and that it is therefore necessary to combine the teaching of a language with the "culture of the target language." He goes so far as to say that "It is impossible to learn a new language without learning its culture." This assertion is supported by Carol Morgan (1993), Senior research Assistant at Durham University, in her article "Attitude Change and Foreign Language Culture Learning" where she quotes Byram (1989:22,116) as saying that it not possible to separate language from culture, and that as a new language is learned, so is the culture of that language.

Therefore for the purposes of this essay, the use of the word "culture" will be in the context of culture and language being inextricably interwoven, and not in the sense of a television documentary; that is, exposing the culture of another country.

## **The Current Situation**

It has been the experience of the writer that while cross-cultural studies are taught as a component in EAP courses in South East Asian countries, at least with respect to students intending to study in Australia, cultural considerations are not routinely taught in General English classes in these countries. There is a belief that since students of General English do not necessarily anticipate studying overseas, it is not necessary for them to study the culture of the target language. In schools where this is the case, it indicates a lack of appreciation of the relationship between language and culture. Since most language schools are commercial ventures, the expectations of students who are the clients, are of paramount importance, and it is often felt by the management of Language Schools that fee-paying foreign students could feel that their money is not well spent if the teacher were to deviate from teaching what the students perceive as English Language to teaching "culture". It is also sometimes considered that the students' first encounter with the communicative method employed by most English Language Schools in the region today is sufficient alien "imposition" on them, since it is assumed that most South East Asian students come from an educational system where rote learning is predominant, and teaching is one-way and very teacher dominated. With these considerations in mind, English Language Schools in general do not place a great deal of importance on cultural issues in their General English classes.

## **The problems with cross-culture in relation to General English Classes**

The widespread omission of culture as a component of General English classes, whether by design or by lack of forethought, is possibly due to a misconception of exactly what culture is and can be, and of its value to the language learner. The most common form of "culture" included in General English classes is what is commonly called "cross-culture", and it is this form of culture that is commonly taught in EAP.

"Cross culture" as taught in EAP classes of students intending to study in Australia, has as its main purpose the provision of the means to facilitate such studies with as little social and academic "culture shock" as possible. Therefore the nature of a component of this kind is frequently didactic and somewhat one-way, requiring the students to accommodate the culture of the target language or as Fenimore, (1977) puts it, there is an anticipation of a "movement of one individual from his or her own native culture into the meaning system of another." Students are learning "about" the foreign culture and the associated linguistic and social ramifications, and therefore their own culture is at best viewed in a comparative way, and at worst, can be subordinated to the domination of the foreign culture. If this is the case, a kind of grieving, or cognitive and affective struggle within the student can arise (Fenimore, 2002).

There is another problem with this approach. If General English students are required to "move" toward the target culture, the question is toward whose culture should they move? English is no longer "owned" by England. It is claimed as an official second language by many countries around the world, each of which uses the language to express its own values and views of the world (Graddol 1997). Therefore to teach "cross culture" would entail the arbitrary selection of the culture of a "representative" country where English is spoken (such as England or the United States of America). The danger in doing this is that it may misrepresent English as the sole property of western, Anglo-American type English-speaking cultures. This validity of this is questionable when countries such as India, Fiji and Singapore claim English as official languages. There is also a possibility of alienating students who come from countries where the Anglo-American pact is perceived as Imperialistic, or unfriendly, thus raising the possibility of adversely affecting their language learning. Modiano (2001) says that "there is a need to gain a better understanding of those aspects of the ELT practitioner's behaviour which can be perceived as furthering the forces of linguistic imperialism."

With the best intentions, the inclusion of a "cross-cultural" component as defined by Fenimore, or the implementation of a cross-cultural approach to teaching English could have negative ramifications with respect to the students, and in a commercial language school, on the viability of the business.

Therefore it is understandable that this kind of cross-cultural course is not taught in General English classes.

### **Potential problems with not including a cultural component in General English classes**

However, the deliberate exclusion or unintended non-inclusion of some sort of cultural appreciation in general English language classes can be just as detrimental to students learning a second language. Le (2002) refers to a

condition called "language shock", and asserts that "Learners' attitudes toward the second language is (sic) a crucial factor affecting their success or failure in learning the second language." He cites an example of some Vietnamese students experiencing severe "language shock" when first experiencing some unexpected and very challenging aspects of English Language, such as the existence of irregular verbs and the rules governing the use of articles. Le (2002) says that some students find such linguistic features as "shockingly unbearable". So seriously does Fenimore (2002) regard language shock, that she describes the possible effect of it as possibly shaking an affected student's perception of him or herself "to its very foundations". Therefore, the awareness of such a condition in a student by the teacher so as to avoid or minimize it, and a corresponding ability to deal with it, is crucial to the student's success in learning the second language.

Since such language shock often stems from a cultural base, it would seem that the inclusion of a cultural component in General English classes is necessary to maximise the effectiveness of language learning in these classes and to prevent a potential cessation of learning which language shock could induce. There is then the question of how to implement this in a relevant way to general English teaching and language learning.

One of the dangers of teaching English in isolation (i.e. without cultural considerations), is that there is a risk of the teacher unintentionally ignoring the students' cultural sensitivities, or at least in the student's eyes, riding roughshod over them. The student might start to build up a bank of "bad experiences" with learning English which unbeknown to the teacher could prevent the student from experiencing success with the language.

### **A Possible Solution**

In response to Modiano and the other problems associated with excluding culture from the teaching of general English, or with incorporating inappropriate teaching models, a more appropriate way of incorporating cultural considerations in the General English classroom could be to adopt an "intercultural" approach to teaching English as suggested by Fenimore (1997) in which the teacher and the student recognise each other's "meaning systems and cultures" and strive to preserve the integrity of both (student's and teacher's) through sensitivity, understanding and continual negotiation and incorporation into the English language lessons wherever the need is recognised.

This will often involve an incidental approach to cultural considerations, since situations will arise in the classroom unexpectedly. The difficulty here is that it requires the teacher to have some degree of knowledge of the language and culture of the country in which he or she is teaching, and strategies on how to deal with these issues as they arise. Equipping the teacher with this awareness and these skills is to a large extent the responsibility of the Language School management. This can be accomplished by including it as part of a new teacher's orientation, and through active in-service professional development, as well as informally on a daily basis as teachers' experience in the foreign environment grows. The willingness to learn about, and consider the culture of the language in which English is being taught, and to acquire the sensitivity to recognise situations where an intercultural input into the lesson is required, is the responsibility of the teacher, but must also be encouraged by the administration, and there needs to be a general staff awareness of the importance of culture in language acquisition.

Perhaps "interculture" can be likened to the concept of "interlanguage", if only in the sense that the degree of acceptance by the student of certain linguistic features with an inherent bearing on culture, could be regarded as being positioned on a continuum, and therefore seen as a stage of development, rather than as the student's failure to grasp or accept the features because of psychological or cultural unreadiness. This takes the pressure off the student, thereby minimising language shock, while at the same time acknowledging that full acceptance has not yet been reached, with due recognition given to the student's position on the said continuum. In time, the student could be encouraged to slide up the continuum toward the "target" when a state of readiness has been reached. Even if full acceptance is never truly achieved, the student may still be able to use the linguistic feature in question, while continuing to stand in his or her own cultural paradigm. This is especially true, since under this approach he or she has not been required to "move".

### **Some practical suggestions for implementation of the "Intercultural" approach**

Having established the need for an intercultural rather than cross-cultural approach to teaching General English in the students' home country, it would be useful to consider the practical aspects of how to incorporate it into classroom practice.

One important aspect of English language teaching is pronunciation. It is important for the learner to achieve a standard of pronunciation where he or she is intelligible. If this is not achieved, then he or she is unable to communicate, and the effectiveness and value of his interlanguage is questionable. However, it is imperative not to confuse effectiveness with acceptability, which is arbitrary. An Australian accent is just as acceptable as an American accent, or an Indonesian accent, as long as intelligibility is achieved, or in other words, as long as it is effective. "Correct" pronunciation is not to be confused with elocution, and could be defined in terms of its communicative qualities, not some arbitrary "standard", such as the requirement imposed on Australian Broadcasters in the 1950's, which demanded a mastery of a "BBC English" accent as a pre-requisite to employment. To say that Australian English is not acceptable, is to disregard its effectiveness as a means of communication and implies that Australians are not true native speakers of English, and therefore that their pronunciation is in need of correction. These days this assertion would be ludicrous, at least to Australians, and no doubt to other non-British native speakers of English in many countries around the world.

Since many countries now claim ownership of English, it is not possible to identify "correct" English in terms of nationality or regionality. To demand a standard of pronunciation similar to that of a "native speaker" is therefore spurious. Many Indian citizens speak very fluent and intelligible English, and may consider themselves to be native speakers. Yet, they have a very identifiable accent. Should their accent be "corrected", and if so, to what? The same could be applied to other Asian, intelligible variations of English pronunciation. Another consideration is to whom the language is intelligible. Australian visitors to Singapore may not understand TV soap operas acted out in English there, but to Singaporeans, the language is perfectly clear and acceptable. North Americans may have trouble understanding the Australian accent. Defining effective pronunciation is clearly problematic, and perhaps

for the sake of pragmatism, "effectiveness" of pronunciation needs to be evaluated in the context in which it is enunciated.

English language teachers in language schools in South East Asia predominately come from Australia, Britain and North America. Therefore, by default rather than by design, these are the predominate patterns of pronunciation set for South East Asian students to follow. However, the question still remains as to how close to native speaker proficiency, as defined by the example of their teachers, should students be expected to achieve. Once intelligibility (again defined by the teachers) is achieved, should the students be encouraged to "improve" further? Littlewood (1984) maintains that "when we try to adopt new speech patterns, we are to some extent giving up markers of our own identity." Language shock can come from any event which upsets a students perception of "self".

Modiano advocates more leniency in the demands of teachers for accuracy in pronunciation and describes English language teaching as "an enterprise primarily dedicated to the acquisition of inter-cultural communicative skills." He says that teachers should be committed to English language teaching and learning skills which are "supportive of cultural diversity." Therefore to pick an arbitrary standard for pronunciation is fraught with danger.

Rather than trying to accurately mimic a native English speaker, represented by the teacher, the question should be, are the student's utterances clear enough to be understood? Should Indonesian students be told to stop rolling their 'R's just because it is not represented on a pronunciation tape from the English Language text currently being used? Should a German student's inability to pronounce a "th" sound count against him or her? As long as the language of these students is intelligible, then their interlanguage in terms of pronunciation is acceptable. In the classroom, if intelligibility is the criteria acceptable pronunciation rather than "accuracy", then a great deal of student stress could be alleviated. Students could be made aware of the fact that many countries speak English and have many different ways of pronouncing the words, and each of these ways is correct if it is intelligible. If the teacher is a good mimic, he or she could demonstrate different accents – including an exaggerated form of his or her own – to humorous effect. Humour (not aimed at the student) can relieve a good deal of classroom angst (Morgan 1993). If the teacher can understand the student, and if it is reasonable to expect that most speakers of English could also understand the student, then the student has reached a point on the interlanguage continuum where his or her pronunciation is acceptable.

In terms of English language structure and function, it is necessary for the teacher to be aware of instances where certain structures may cause shock or confusion. For instance in English it is acceptable to say, "Where is the toilet?" However, this may be too direct in the Indonesian language, where one would say, "Saya mau ke belakang", or "I want to go to the back." (Hertz 1999). Indonesian students need to aware that even though it might be somewhat shocking to them that someone in Australia would admit verbally to wanting to go to the toilet, let alone use the word "toilet" itself, it is quite acceptable to do so in Australian English. It could even be of interest for them to know that in the USA, the word "toilet" is often substituted with "bathroom" because people there, too, regard it as indelicate to be so direct as to use the word "toilet". Indonesian students also need to know that "I want to go to the back," may not convey its intended message to native

English speakers, and therefore they may need to use the Australian direct way of asking the question when speaking to Australians.

The Fijian expression, "Sa siga na vanua", which translates approximately to "It's the day of the land," conveys the meaning in Fiji that it has stopped raining. A direct translation into English would have no meaning in Australia. It is also not meaningful to directly translate the English "It's stopped raining" into Fijian. This is not merely a linguistic feature; it is also cultural. The Fijians have an affinity with the land, and see all weather cycles as having their well defined place and usefulness in the life of a Fijian. Therefore their expression for the cessation of rain, expresses recognition of the centrality and importance of elements of nature to their existence on the earth. The English version implies a very different relationship with nature – perhaps relief that there is no more rain, and that there will be sunshine. That is, that sunshine is better than rain.

The first example given above indicates a cultural modesty and requirement for delicateness among Indonesians, while the second example demonstrates the connectedness of native Fijians with the land. If neither of these conditions is present in the same contexts in English, then the differences in cultural significance need to be highlighted to the students as well as the structural features of the utterance. Only in this way can full understanding and acceptance occur.

If the concepts behind structures are not firmly in place, the confusion, confrontation and the associated problems as described earlier can arise. In Indonesia, for example, if English sentences such as, "We had a lovely picnic. We had the beach to ourselves" are taught, some confusion could arise. Assuming the vocabulary is understood, and the situation – namely that of a small group of people having a picnic at the beach where there were no other people – then there could be a major problem in understanding, based on culture. As a generalization, westerners, who cherish privacy will take pleasure in there being no-one else at the beach. However, Indonesians, from a more "high context" culture (Hall, 1976) could be disappointed that there were not more people there. In fact, the corresponding expression of pleasure in Indonesian takes the opposite view and would be something like, "We had a lovely picnic. There was a big crowd there." Without an understanding by the teacher of this fundamental difference and a careful explanation of the two different cultural attitudes, considerable confusion and stress could result in the learner from two otherwise fairly mundane English sentences. Specifically, there could be a great confusion over the meaning of the word "lovely".

It is vital to understand and resolve situations such as those described above in the English language classroom. Festinger's theory of 'cognitive dissonance' (1959) is an important consideration here. This theory states that where a person holds ideas in his or her head which are inconsistent, it arouses a feeling of discomfort, especially if those ideas are internalised. On the other hand, ideas which are consistent produce a feeling of wellbeing, which is conducive to learning.

In a simple case of misunderstanding such as the situations above, an explanation and situational practice could be sufficient to overcome any cognitive dissonance, but there could be some cases where the shock is more likely to remain other strategies could be employed. Le (2002) describes the cultural shock experienced by Vietnamese students in Australia discover that



students in Australia frequently address their professors by their first names. Such students may find it very difficult to adapt to this situation, and it could be the cause of ongoing discomfort. One way to deal with situations like this is to use role-play where students are encouraged to adopt a role or stance which is contrary to their own. Reluctant students could be supplied with some disguising 'prop' such as a pair of sunglasses, or a hat, which allows them to step out of themselves without feeling that they are betraying their own basic beliefs. Removal of the prop after the role-play signifies that the persona has been abandoned and the 'real' person is back. This adoption of a contrary stance in role-play requires the student to advocate (under the protection of his or her adopted persona) views contrary to his or her own. This often has the effect of resulting in some kind of acceptance or at least an understanding of these views.

Where some grammatical point is to be taught that the students find confronting or terribly confusing, it is often useful to remind them that their English should not be looked at as defective, but rather on a continuum – an interlanguage in itself, where the main criteria for validity is the degree to which this interlanguage communicates to English speakers. Where there is a problem of communication, there is a corresponding need for a shift along the continuum toward the target language. However, it could be pointed out that being on a point on a language continuum is not a judgement; it's a location, or a stage of development. It is not necessary to grasp the new idea immediately. In fact students could be reassured that it is normal to be shocked by first exposure to some grammatical features of a second language. Therefore a student should recognise that he or she is on the continuum and relax in the knowledge that language learning is a gradual construction of concepts and with the expectation that he or she will move up the continuum of interlanguage in time. In other words, the concept of incorrect, "defective" or "broken" English is replaced with the knowledge that the student is simply at an appropriate stage of development. Evaluation by the teacher in a judgemental manner, or even in relation to the "distance" from the target language is inappropriate in this case. How far a teacher should actually go in describing language learning theory to his or her students is best decided by the teacher, but at least the effective principles of "interlanguage" and "interculture" could be applied in order to ease the apprehension of the students.

The students should also understand that there is a need for a certain degree of tolerance of ambiguity in learning a language – that a concept may not be grasped in its entirety in one lesson – that it may well take many lessons and many revisits during which the student's construction of the concept will become progressively complete. In the meanwhile, the existing interlanguage should be regarded as adequate until the next lesson.

In an intercultural sensitive classroom, the teacher does not demand that the student moves from his or her cultural viewpoint to that of the teachers, but that he or she acknowledges that another cultural point of view exists and has validity at least within the culture of the target language. From this standpoint it is necessary to work out ways in which to deal with any conflicts which may occur, either through discussion, explanation, role-play, humour or other means, but confrontationalist attitudes along the lines of "well, if you want to learn English, you have to learn this" is totally inappropriate and potentially damaging to the student's progress in language learning.

Where the language school uses a text book based curriculum, it is important to adapt the material as much as possible to local situations. Where maps are used, it is advisable to retain the aims and basic format of the lesson, but replace European or American towns and maps with those of the country in which the course is being taught. European foods, recipes and shopping conditions can also be replaced with those of a more local flavour. This can be done by teachers on a lesson by lesson basis, and the adaptations kept in a special file which over time will build up to the point where all text book content has been 'localised'. According to Robinson (1998), "culturally familiar content is an essential ingredient in introducing the learner to new concepts, linguistic and otherwise, in the second language, foreign language and bilingual classroom."

For all this to be achieved, there needs to be a willingness on the part of the teacher and the school, as well as an understanding of the differences between "cross-culture" and "interculture". There also needs to be a large amount of mutual trust and respect built between teachers and students. Trust is given by the students when they can see that the teacher is not trying to present the English language as superior to their own, or make demands on the student to abandon aspects of his or her own culture. Differences between the first language and English are just differences with no suggestion of evaluation on the part of the teacher. Teachers must also be willing to investigate the cultural differences of the language of the country in which they are teaching and to communicate their experiences to other teachers. There needs to be an awareness within the school of the importance of cultural issues in teaching a foreign language and a commitment to keep learning and to pass on information to new teachers. This is necessary with seemingly small points as well as larger social issues. One example of this is the use of English language exercises involving "Family" with Cambodians. Virtually all Cambodians alive today have lost family to the Khmer Rouge regime. Adults have lost parents, brothers, sisters, and children. Children have lost grandparents, aunts, uncles and other relatives. This makes it especially important that any questions about family in typical English language textbooks be carefully screened before being given to Cambodians.

Respect is sometimes given automatically to teachers in South East Asian countries, but it may be shaken by such things as students using teachers' first names, how the teachers dress. This is a difficult area to address, but the teacher's personality enters into play here. Firstly the teacher needs to appear credible to the students. This may mean that teachers have to dress in a way compatible with the students' expectations. To do otherwise could set up a feeling of resistance within the students and undermine trust and respect. As the students get to know the teacher as a person, the teachers' other attributes may come to the fore, but it is true that first impressions are important.

It is also incumbent upon the teacher to engender an atmosphere in the classroom where the students feel secure and encouraged. Small successes and progressions should be acknowledged by the teacher and recognised by the students, rather than focussing on how far they have to go before they reach the level of interlanguage they see as necessary for their circumstances, or worse, how bad their English is.

Teachers need to see their own culture as only one of many, but that theirs is not only represented by the English language, it is also revealed by it – with



all its prejudices and biases, as well as its more positive aspects. Therefore it is essential teachers first of all be aware of these inherent prejudices and biases present in their language, and then to know enough about the language of the country in which they are teaching to be able to anticipate and overcome linguistic/cultural problems as they arise.

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