

On NOT Teaching Culture: Giving Our Students Tools for a Future without Borders

Senior English Language Fellow John Mark King
St. Petersburg, Russia
www.jorabek.com
johnmark@jorabek.com

First of all, what is “Culture”?

As language professionals, it is useful for us to define culture as:

a set of values, behaviors and ideas of any one group of individuals that gives them identity and a sense of cohesion and membership (paraphrased from Suzanne Wong and Ron Scollon, 2001).

Such a definition opens us to looking at much more than the traditions, customs, dress and food of groups of people as is often done when discussing culture. In fact, such a definition can set into motion a radical change in the way we look at the word *culture* and, in my opinion, can even make the word itself irrelevant.

But what does this mean? At this point such concepts become more relevant:

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| a. <i>methods of socialization</i> | e. <i>how one defines time</i> |
| b. <i>topic placement in conversation</i> | f. <i>the meaning of family and friendship</i> |
| c. <i>eye contact</i> | g. <i>the roles of men and women in society</i> |
| d. <i>personal space</i> | h. <i>developing/maintaining social literacy.</i> |

Still, there are problems. We know, for example, that **cultures** never meet each other. **People** meet each other. And we know that there can be just as much variety within one culture as there is between two.

This leads us to looking at **Discourse groups or communities** (big “D” discourse), an area of discourse analysis concerned with the ways in which different groups of people define themselves and the characteristics of membership of their group (as opposed to analysis of language in use, or, little “d” discourse). This concept was proposed by linguist John Swales in 1990 and was further developed by James Paul Gee as an extension of work done on language in context throughout the 1980s. For example, there are Discourse groups of doctors, students, musicians and New Yorkers who each share common ways of communicating and maintaining their group identity. Everyone is a member of more than one group. And we constantly re-affirm the status of our membership and check the status of other members.

Important here is that such groups can cross cultures. For example, jazz guitarists in both St. Louis and Moscow can be identified as members of the same Discourse group. But a husband and wife who grew up in the same city can be defined as members of different Discourse groups (men and women).

The biggest problem we face as teachers of English is the unique role that English language education plays in the world today. We now teach an international language. *English has more non-native speakers than native speakers.*

Thus, there is a very good chance that many of the English speakers with which our students will communicate in the future **will not be native speakers themselves**. And with the growth of English as a Lingua Franca in Kachru’s (1986) expanding circle of English use, World Englishes (see Jenkins 2006) and the struggle between language identity and intelligibility, the future of communication in English will pose serious challenges to our students.

How do we deal with this as English language teachers? As suggested by Apteikin (2002), the old model of communicative competence first introduced by Canale and Swales in the 1980s is in need of a radical redesign. This model assumed that competence was “target-based,” or that learners develop competence for communication with only one group of people. Considering the nature of English today, English language learners need a much broader set of skills, or **intercultural competence**.

In other words, rather than teaching only about the specific idiosyncrasies of one large group of people (Americans, Britons) and then comparing them to those of another, we should also give students tools for dealing with a wide variety of potentially unexpected intercultural situations. We cannot be aware of all potential possibilities for misunderstanding or breakdowns in communication, but we can be more skilled at noticing when such problems may arise and how to better cope with them.

My suggestion is that teachers do this by taking a **Discourse Approach** to language education. By exploring with learners the diversity of communication styles and expectations that exist in their home communities, students can develop skills of intercultural competence which can be applied in the world at large.

For example:

Making Strange

Provide activities for students to “make strange” their own behaviors so that they may begin to see that much of what they take granted as “normal” in communication may not be true for everyone else (adapted from Chlopek, 2008).

1. Inventing new cultures and devising new forms of transmitting information (greetings, good-byes, etc.)
2. Predicting certain behaviors of their own that may seem odd to an outsider or a foreigner
3. Interviewing foreigners they know about things they found unexpected or odd when they first arrived in Russia
4. Think of a time you traveled to another part of the country. What kinds of behaviors did people have there that were unexpected?

Exploring Face

Prepare activities for students to explore **face negotiation** and strategies of **involvement** and **independence**, which can mean using formal vs. informal language (see Brown and Levinson’s 1987 book on politeness strategies).

1. Observe the differences between the rules of classmates’ and friends’ behavior when they speak with each other and with their professors or superiors, and then surmise what might happen if someone were to break one of these rules.
2. Practice and explore differences in making requests based on the speakers’ relationship and the imposition of the request.

Word Ambiguity

Explore the definitions of basic words such as *family*, *green*, *love* and *community* and see how that even for people who are members of the same *culture*, such concepts can be defined very differently.

Rhetorical Structure and Writing

Investigate the rhetorical structure of writing such as newspaper articles and medicine bottles to determine what assumptions are made by the author about the reader which are not explicitly stated.

Identifying Metacommunication

Provide examples of basic utterance and how such a great deal of information is implied based on the shared knowledge and assumptions of the speakers (adapted from Scollon and Scollon, 2001). For example, what is implied, but not stated, in the following?

1. The phone is ringing.
2. There is a man at the door.
3. Is it warm in here to you?

And Finally...

I do not think that we should stop teaching about American or British history, customs and values. On the contrary, such topics are quite useful for the development of mutual understanding and the generation of authentic classroom language. But such exploration is only the beginning.

My hope is that our students will not only speak, read and write grammatical English, but will also be equipped with skills that can help them navigate the growing number and complexity of people who can *also* claim to be speakers of the language.

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