

# CROSS CULTURAL CONTEXTS IN ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEACHING

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## *Abstract*

*This paper reflects on the need of students of English language to experience 'English-speaking culture'. Due to the scarcity of natural contexts to communicate in English in West Sumatra it falls to English teachers to provide both English-speaking context and ongoing cross cultural analysis. Some ways teachers across the curriculum can provide a context of English-speaking culture and implement cross cultural analysis while teaching are discussed. The 'onion' model of culture is presented to show that culture is not only 'what' but also 'how' and 'why'. Examples are given of how culture can be explicitly and implicitly taught.*

**Key words/phrases:** *culture, context, English-speaking culture, cross cultural analysis*

## **A. INTRODUCTION**

The starting point for this paper is that all English language teachers can teach, both explicitly and implicitly, about culture. One main reason for this, and an assumption behind the title of this seminar, is that language is part of culture. The culture of people who have used English for hundreds of years is built into the English language. Others, following Sapir and Whorf, would say that the language we speak controls the way we think. Particularly the culture of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, but also the cultures of the United States of America, Canada, Australia and New Zealand to a lesser extent parts of southern Africa and India and surrounding countries. When speaking English this culture is more or less assumed. More if the conversation is taking place in an English-speaking country. Less if the conversation is in a non-English-speaking country. The culture under discussion today, for the sake of simplicity, could be called 'English-speaking culture'.

The compulsory English department subject Cross Cultural Understanding or Cross Cultural Communication deals explicitly with different aspects of culture, how and why misunderstandings occur and

how to negotiate a culture different from one's own and deal with such misunderstandings. English-speaking culture is a Western culture and very different from the cultures of Indonesia, which are Eastern. It may be thought that anything to do with culture should be left to the teachers of that subject. However culture is so comprehensive, pervasive and relevant to every part of learning English that the suggestion in this paper is that in the other English subjects, and indeed also in high schools, English teachers can and should intentionally teach culture while teaching language.

## **B. CROSS CULTURAL COMMUNICATION CONTEXT**

As English teachers we are often in a cross cultural context. For many hours each week we are immersed in an English-speaking milieu. We are to a certain extent operating in English-speaking ways as we teach English, read, research, answer email, prepare for seminars, and so on. The rest of our time however we are operating in Indonesian-speaking culture, or Minang-speaking culture, or Chinese-Indonesian culture or something else. In fact we live in a multicultural environment.

The crucial question is: do our students

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face cross cultural contexts in the same way we do? In some ways the answer is 'no, not yet'. Some of our students have never interacted with anyone who is not Minang. However that is rather unusual. Most of our students have friends who are not Minang. Therefore they are exposed to at least some other ethnicities and cultures of Indonesia. Their experience of other Indonesian cultures is in fact a good starting-point for cross cultural analysis. In this way the answer is 'maybe'. Furthermore a few of our students have interacted with foreigners. They have had experience of communicating in a cross cultural context. In this way the answer could be 'yes'.

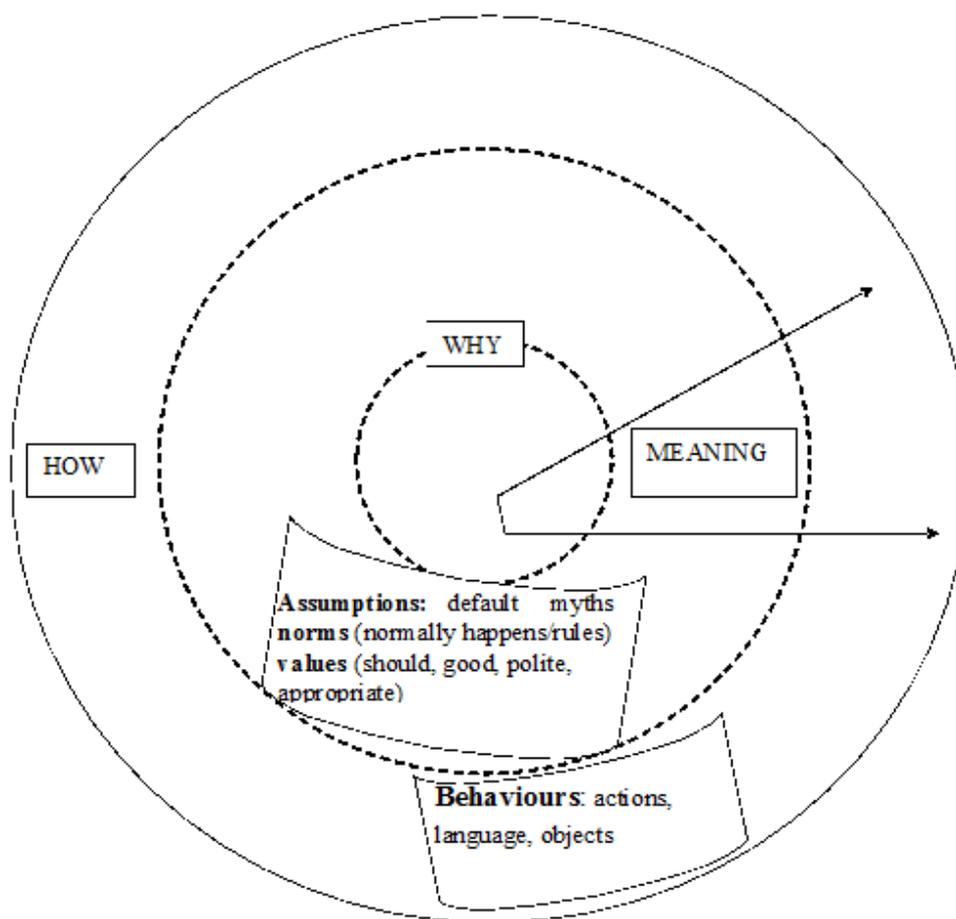
Whether our students have any

speaking context in order to master English at all.

Our students can slip into English-speaking culture as they come into our classrooms, and slip back into their own culture when the class ends, in a similar way to the way we do in our professional lives. We are doing English students a disservice if we do not provide them with a safe place to experience and practise English-speaking culture and negotiate this cross cultural experience.

### C. IMPLEMENTATION

Before we can discuss how English teachers can provide such cross cultural experience we will review the various parts of culture.



Picture 1. Relation Assumptions and Behavior

experience communicating with English speakers or not, what is being suggested in this paper is that the English teacher is the best person to provide a significant amount of English-speaking context. In fact our students need some exposure to an English-

#### 1. What is culture?

A diagram found in many books on culture to help explain the complexity of culture is the 'onion'. Any culture is made up of cultural behaviours, that is objects

and actions, one of which is language. Communication takes place at this level. This is labelled 'how' as stated by Brita & Ningsih in 'Cross-Cultural Communication: a textbook' (2013:48). The relevance to English teachers is that we teach how communication is carried out in English. Some examples will follow later in this paper.

These behaviours are controlled by assumptions, that is norms or what is normally done in a culture, and values. An example of an Indonesian norm would be handing something to someone with the right hand. In English-speaking culture something can be given or received with either the left or right hand. Our students may need to practise this in order to feel comfortable receiving something from someone's left hand. We have to prepare them for a possible future scenario when they are working in a hotel and a guest returns the key with their left hand. This practice could be part of a speaking class roleplay. In a reading class an example of an English-speaking cultural value would be: 'it is good for teenagers to get a job to earn their own pocket-money'. Minang values connected to teenagers and pocket-money are probably different. This could lead to a very fruitful discussion comparing the two cultures, perhaps in a public speaking class, or an essay in a writing class.

There are a few key English-speaking cultural values that help to explain a large amount of English language behaviour. Researchers such as Hofstede have compiled a list of more than twenty cultural scales, and shown how important it is to be aware of these cultural differences when communicating with people, for example in a business environment. Possibly the most relevant for our purposes today are individualism (versus group-focus), which often also correlates with independence (versus dependence). Egalitarianism (versus hierarchy and authoritarianism). Similar gender roles (versus different gender roles). And directness (versus indirectness). Directness is connected with low sensitivity to surrounding context.

The indirectness found in Eastern cultures is connected to high awareness of the situation. In a literature class students may be reading about a stay-at-home father. This behaviour will be better understood if the 21st century English-speaking cultural value of similar gender roles is also discussed. In every kind of English class students ask why English speakers do not ask acquaintances in a first conversation about their salary, romantic and marital status, weight, nor do they try to take a photo with them. The topic of taboo topics and behaviours could profitably be linked to a discussion of group and non-group cultures.

This level of the onion diagram is labelled 'why', and answers the question 'why do we do what we do?' as in the example above. However the heart of culture which controls both the assumptions just mentioned and also all the behaviour is the worldview. Worldview is made up of all the beliefs (religious, scientific etc.) as well as goals and aims of a culture. The meaning of a culture's behaviour is found in its norms and values, and the meaning of these assumptions are found in its worldview (Brita & Ningsih, 2013: 75).

In a listening class students may hear a woman speaking to a child: 'Look at me when I'm talking to you'. It may need to be explained that for English speakers eye-contact means attending to a conversation, and it also implies honesty. Lack of eye-contact is believed to be either lack of interest or dishonesty. The listening section of TOEFL is more about testing students' knowledge of North American cultural assumptions and beliefs than vocabulary and grammar.

## **2. How do we teach culture?**

The first step in deciding how to provide English-speaking context is to look around for natural and normal ways to use English and English-speaking culture, for example here in Padang. Our students could meet tourists, or volunteer with international NGOs. Perhaps they can

travel overseas or work for international companies. At the very least they chat to English-speaking facebook friends and attend international seminars such as this one. However realistically many of these experiences are rarely possible for them, as indeed they are for us.

Nevertheless before and alongside these opportunities, some of which are in the future, English teachers need to prepare and support students for careers in business, hospitality, diplomacy, tourism, education where these communication contexts will regularly occur.

In all English classes instructing students to open and close windows and doors, hand in work, carry out activities are opportunities to provide some cross cultural context. Reacting to good or bad news, giving an opinion, and making complaints, relevant to what is happening in the class can all be done in English using English-speaking style, starting with very short simple ones in first year and graduating to more complex examples. English students interaction with their teachers can be a gentle introduction to an English-speaking communication context. This requires more than just both the students and teacher using English language in the classroom but also using English-speaking culture. Creativity and a sense of the usefulness of the English teacher providing this cross cultural experience by intentionally use English-speaking culture in classrooms in Indonesia is needed.

Students of English do not know how to introduce themselves in English unless we teach them explicitly. If we do not bring their attention to it, they may not realize that introductions in English are quite different from introductions using Indonesian. This is usually covered in speaking classes, but is also relevant in listening classes. English teachers can help students explore why things are done in certain ways in English, such as the use of names and titles, taboo topics, small talk, when and how to apologize, amongst others. Most speech acts are carried out differently in English and Indonesian. In

addition to the specific teaching of speech acts which occurs in speaking, and to a lesser extent, listening classes, all English teachers can model these in the classroom as a natural part of the flow of the lesson.

In all cultures there is a tension between showing politeness and being truthful. In speaking and listening classes the way this tension is resolved differently in English and in Indonesian could be studied appropriately in relation to compliments, evaluations, asking for help, or greetings.

In any kind of reading class English-speaking culture very soon appears. If, for example, we look at the reading section of a TOEFL exam, we find that the readings assume an extensive knowledge of American culture, including its history, geography, climate, education system, medical system, scientists, politics and so on. This assumed knowledge could be set as homework before the lesson, or discussed in class as part of the pre-reading.

Another task relevant to the reading class is suggested by Lambert (2001). As part of a vocabulary exercise about euphemisms, ask students to find more examples of euphemisms which can be explained in terms of English-speaking culture.

In a poetry lesson the English teacher, in addition to everything else that a poetry teacher does, would also need to teach an English style of reading poetry aloud, which is in fact quite different from Indonesian style (personal communication, Rusdi Noor). The same would apply to story-telling, drama, and being a master of ceremonies. Examples, perhaps in the form of videoclips, could be provided and a comparison made between the two styles before the English style is practised.

Many examples of using literature and movies can be found to teach about culture. For example in the novel 'The Namesake' by Jhumpa Lahiri the clash between the main character's experiences of Indian and North American cultures is explored (personal communication Dr Kurnia Ningsih). The movie 'Lost in Translation' explores

North Americans experiencing culture shock in Japan.

The values of independence and individualism are the foundation of Western academic writing, and help explain the strict anti-plagiarism ethic. Students cannot be expected to accept these Western cultural values, at least when writing, without some discussion of the history of Western education and culture.

### 3. Why are cultures different?

In all of the examples above the students can be directed to find out what is different from their own culture, how it is different and why it is different. A possible example from a structure class about conjugations -

Jane drove through the red light.

Jim screamed.

Teacher: Why did Jim scream?

Students: Because he was shocked and frightened at Jane driving through the red light.

Teacher: Is it normal (in English-speaking culture) to drive through a red light?

Students: No, it is not normal.

Teacher: Why do Jane and Jim not normally drive through red lights?

Students can offer any suggestions. An answer might be 'because it is against the law'.

Teacher: From this example what is the English-speaking belief about obeying the law?

The kind of thinking required by this exercise is analytical, which is also a part of English-speaking culture!

If aspects of cultural behaviour are used by the teacher in the class, and discussed (at the three levels suggested by the 'onion' diagram) as they come up in the lesson

material, students will be helped to formulate for themselves a more complete mental picture of English-speaking culture. Any culture, even one's own, takes many years to learn. Therefore English teachers can expect to slowly see students building an adequate cultural knowledge as more and more aspects of English-speaking culture are explored and practised in and outside the classroom.

In order for the maximum benefit to be had from these experiences in culture, further personal questions can be added. For the example above, some of those questions could be:

Do you scream when someone drives through a red light?

Do you drive through a red light?

Why or why not?

What belief underlies your behaviour?

In this way students are exploring the 'cross' part of a cross cultural experience. In addition they are discovering their own culture, which is in fact the foundation for understanding any other culture.

### D. CONCLUSION

Part of the joy and challenge of communicating well in English for our students is to be able to do so in the context of English-speaking culture. This context is mostly ahead of students in their future careers. However the point has been stressed that teachers can provide some English-speaking culture context. In this paper suggestions have been put forward as to why and how English teachers can include the teaching of culture implicitly through using English as the language of medium in the classroom and its attendant English-speaking culture. In addition English teachers can explicitly help students in the cross cultural task of asking what, how and why in order to analyze the English-speaking culture they are studying as part of their language studies.

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