



## **ENGLISH LANGUAGE EDUCATION - INTEGRATING CULTURE**

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Culture is basically in three salient categories of human activity. They are the personal, the collective and the expressive. As the individuals we think and function is personal, whereby we function in a social context is collective and the society expresses is expressive. The culture is build up on these three pillars. As cultures are brought increasingly into greater contact with one another, multicultural considerations are brought to bear to an ever increasing degree in English Language Education which paves a path to integrating culture. English language practitioners earlier emphasized on developing LSRW skills in order to develop learners' proficiency in English. In addition to these four skills, they added vocabulary and grammar components but ignored important component "Culture" In recent years language experts have recognized its importance in language teaching. For this reason, it has been termed as the fifth skill for language learners. The role of culture was over looked earlier by practitioners as language educators as language education was thought to be a process of mastering the linguistic codes. It was mostly confined to language skills plus vocabulary, grammar and punctuation. However, they have now realized its importance as language learning and teaching can't take place without contexts and cultures. Earlier, emphasis was on the culture associated with the target language. For instance, if one wants to learn Spanish one needs to learn some aspects of Spanish culture. Now, with the advent of learners' centered teaching, the focus has shifted to culture and contexts of the learner. This paper throws light on the place of culture in English language education and explores ways of integrating it in English language education through collaborative tasks and activities.

English language practitioners earlier emphasized on developing four skills such as listening, speaking, reading and writing in order to develop learners' proficiency in English. It had been thought that if learners developed proficiency in these four skills then they could use the language effectively. In addition to these four skills, they added vocabulary

and grammar components. But they generally ignored another important aspect that has assumed importance in the process of language learning as well as language use. That component is culture. In recent years language experts have recognized its importance in language teaching. For this reason, it has been termed as the fifth skill for language learners that “enhances students’ over all learning experience”(Kramersch 1993 p. 1). The role of culture was over looked earlier by practitioners as language educators as language education was thought to be a process of mastering the linguistic codes. It was mostly confined to language skills plus vocabulary, grammar and punctuation.

However, they have realized its importance as language learning and teaching can’t take place without contexts and cultures. Earlier, emphasis was on the culture associated with the target language. For instance, if one wants to learn French one needs to learn some aspects of French culture. Now, with the advent of learners’ centred teaching, the focus has shifted to culture and contexts of the learner. This paper makes an attempt to explore the place of culture in English language education and explores ways of integrating it in English language education through collaborative tasks and activities. Here, first the term culture has been defined, then rationale for integrating culture is elaborated. Theoretical support for integrating culture with language teaching is also added. Then it has been shown through tasks by way of example how we can integrate culture with English language education.

### **Introduction**

Culture is an important aspect of our life. It has been defined in so many ways. It can be seen as a concept. We can also understand it as a process. We can see culture as a way of life. It includes manners, values, food, dress, language, literature, symbols art and craft of people of a particular place at a point of time. Gail Rabinson (1985), an American researcher classifies culture into three interrelated categories: products, ideas and behavior. He put literature, folklore, art, music and artefacts under products ; beliefs, values and institutions under ideas and customs, habit, dress, foods and leisure under behaviours. Culture is fluid and variable. It differs from people to people, place to place and from time to time. Let us take a very simple example. In the U.K. people say ‘thank you’ very often. If mother passes on a bowl of salad to the child at the dining table, the child says ‘thank you.’ If the child passes on the napkin to the father , father says ‘thank you.’ Such conventions are not found in most Indian families as we take this gesture for granted and understood even without an utterance.

As it has been mentioned, language learning is not confined to learning of the four skills only, vocabulary and grammar and the linguistic code of the language but the culture and context in which it will be used. For instance, if one goes to teach the Chinese learners, one has to be aware of Chinese culture or else they will be misunderstood. If some one comes to teach at Hyderabad, they need to be acquainted with the local culture. In Hyderabad, it is generally, asked as a gesture of greetings whether one has had one's food. The same is not the case in the North of India. If one asks "Have you had your food?" The other person might feel offended. He might think why he has been asked about his food habits. Once an Indian student invited by a family in the U.K. to have dinner. It was a special occasion. Good food was offered. While having food, the student was offered to have some more. The student had the habit of saying 'no' as a matter of politeness. So he said, "No, thank you" expecting that they would ask him again. They offered him different dishes but every time he said 'No, Thank You.' In the U.K. they go by what you say and don't ask you again and again. So he was not given any food for the second time. As a result he was half-fed and came back hungry. To explain the cultural variation it is said in Odia, "Eka deshara boli ,anya deshara gali" meaning "One nation's language could be the another's taboo!" The above mentioned incident happened to the student on a social occasion. This kind of problem can also occur in our classroom. A teacher may come across certain objects or practices of culture, about which they may not be aware of. They need to be aware of some of these as they have to interact with others in the teaching learning process. Certain texts though written in English, might have such cultural elements. A teacher has to be aware of them. Hence there been stress on cultural aspects in language teaching these days.

### **Theoretical Support**

The urge for inclusion of culture in language teaching is a result of inputs and ideas given by different linguistics and intellectuals such as Jean Piaget, Halliday, Vygotsky and Cummins. Jean Piaget's Constructivist theory of learning maintains that learning is an active process in which the learner constructs meaning. He was influenced by John Dewey's (1938) ideas that a learner learns by doing which means that a learner learns by participating in one's environment or cultural contexts. The social integrationist theory of Vygotsky (1962) proposes that children learn through meaningful interactions with their environments. Environment and cultural contexts play an important role in social interactional theory. The role of primary language described by Jim Cummins is also important here. School and

community create an important role in raising self esteem of a learner. Halliday places culture in grammar and calls it a theory of human experience. When he calls it a theory of human experience, it entails larger scope beyond linguistic confines. All these suggest that language education should be looked from a broader perspectives including social and cultural factors in to account. In the next section, we shall discuss why is culture important in English language education?

### **Why Culture?**

It has already been mentioned why culture is important in English Language education. We can reiterate that culture helps in bridging the gap between language and cognition. In other words we can say that it provides a kind of background or contextual knowledge for the learner to understand and acquire skills. For example, if a learner is reading a story by R.K. Narayan say “A Horse and Two Goats”, some cultural input on food habit of farmer in a small village in Southern India, relationship between wife and husband (narrated in the initial page of the story) will help them to comprehend the text easily. Without this, learners might have problem due to contextual difficulties even though the language suits their level.

Culture can foster critical thinking in learners. There are many cultural practices that can evoke serious discussion, argumentative writing and so on. For instance, we give learners a text on dormitory system of the tribal people from Verrier Elwin’s book which describes this system it will lead to very fruitful discussion, argument and debate. Vocabulary building will be easier if we bring in culture into it. Suppose a primary level child reads a word and sees an object on its side, it will be easier for the child to pick up the word.

Integrating culture can ease out the difficulty level or in Krashen’s term lower the affective filter. With the inclusion of cultural elements learners become more familiar with the context and hence more interested and motivated. Their level of anxiety and strain is reduced and learning process becomes easier. Integrating culture can foster understanding and harmony among people. There are misunderstandings and stereotypes among people because people don’t know about one another’s culture. Knowledge of others’ culture will make us more understanding, tolerant and help to co-exist in peace and harmony. If language like English (as it has been seen as a dominant language) is taught just as a code, children from indigenous communities will have a feeling of lack diffidence but if their cultural elements are used they feel resourceful and confident. This may happen to teachers too. Research (Meher, 2010) has

shown that when the learners' culture is integrated with English language education, the proficiency level of the learners has gone up.

### **How?**

The composition of an average English classroom in India is multicultural and multilingual. Children from different linguistic and cultural background come to the classroom. This is not a hurdle for us. It should be treated as strength. There are plenty of cultural resources available in our learners' contexts. They include course or text books, folktales, songs, riddle, proverbs, audiovisuals, newspapers, magazines which could be used as materials. For using cultural resources "task oriented approach towards culture" should be used through cooperative learning tasks (Tomalin and Stempleski 1993, p.9). Here are some examples:

#### **Activity 1**

##### **Food Festival**

**Level: Intermediate**

**Skills: Speaking, Listening and Writing.**

**Time: 30 minutes**

Make the students form into groups of six. Each group is asked to prepare a recipe of a particular region. They plan in group what to prepare and discuss the ingredients and describe how it is prepared. They collect information and materials such picture and clips about the recipe to present in the class. One of the members writes down the points to present in the class. The write-up should contain Introduction to the recipe, where do we get it? What are the ingredients? How do we make it? Once each group is ready with their recipe, they make a presentation on their recipe describing all these points.

#### **Activity 2**

##### **Poster Workshop (Show casing your place)**

**Level: Intermediate**

**Skills: Speaking, Listening and writing.**

**Time: 30 minutes**

The class is divided into a group of five according their region/state/town. They are told that they will be making a presentation to the class about their state/region or town. They need to discuss in the group, what they want to tell or show their class about their state/region/town. They can use pictures, clips and any other materials. After the discussion and preparation of the write up. One member or two members from each group make their presentation.

## **Conclusion**

English language teaching is not about four skills, grammar, vocabulary and phonetics but it also culture. Any language should be taught in context and culture and not in vacuum. Integrating learners' culture empowers the learner and make the local culture survive. We have tried some of these activities in a class on English in Multilingual Contexts at the EFL university Hyderabad. Students enjoyed the activities and the class made them feel resourceful and therefore confident and enthusiastic. What was most striking was that even the most quiet and shy students could take active part in these activities.

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