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## **Language and Culture in ELT**

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### **Introduction**

English Language Teaching (ELT), as it developed after World War II within the field of applied linguistics (Li Wei, 2014:13), responded to the needs of an international market-based economy and the spread of an Anglo-saxon form of democracy during the Cold War (Brutt-Griffler, 2002), and thus did not originally have much concern for culture (Corbett, 2003: 20). The link between language and culture in applied linguistics only became an issue in the 1990s with the identity politics of the time and the advances made in second language acquisition research. Until then, the research and methodological literature of ELT had, from the 1970s onwards, promoted the benefits of learning English through a functional, communicative approach based on democratic access to turns-at-talk and on individual autonomy in the expression, interpretation and negotiation of meaning (see Thornbury, this volume). This communicative approach had been deemed universal in its applicability, because it was grounded in a view of language learners as rational actors, equal before the rules of grammar and the norms of the native speaker, and eager to benefit from the economic opportunities that a knowledge of English would bring. The negotiation of meaning that formed the core of the communicative approach applied to referential or to situational meaning, not necessarily, as was later argued (e.g. Kramersch, 1993), to cultural or to ideological meaning.

Since the end of the Cold War in 1990, and with the advent of globalization, the increasingly multicultural nature of societies has made it necessary for English language teachers to factor 'culture' into ELT and to take into account the culture their students come from. Among the many definitions of culture, the one we retain here is the following: "Culture can be defined as membership in a discourse community that shares a common social space and history, and

common imaginings. Even when they have left that community, its members may retain, wherever they are, a common system of standards for perceiving believing, evaluating and acting. These standards are what is generally called their ‘culture’” (Kramsch, 1998:10). Risager (2007) has proposed the concept of *‘languaculture’* to suggest that there is neither an “essentialist language-culture duality” (p.162) nor a radical distinction between the two, but a “close connection, an interdependence, a complex relationship between language and culture” (p.163).

In the case of ELT, therefore, which culture should be taught as part of the language’s relationship with culture: for example, UK, US, Australian, Indian, or Singaporean national culture?; the global culture of commerce and industry?; or internet culture? And, in increasingly multilingual classrooms, which learners’ culture should be taken into account: their national, regional, ethnic, generational, or professional culture?

In this chapter, we first examine the socio-cultural and socio-political changes of the last twenty years in terms of the relationship of language and culture in ELT. Next, we examine the rise of the field of Intercultural Communication and its relation to language teaching. We then discuss the main current issues and key areas of debate concerning the role of culture in ELT. We finally discuss future developments in the study of language and culture as they relate to the teaching and learning of English.

### **The changing goals of ELT from a socio-cultural and socio-political perspective**

Unlike the teaching of languages other than English, and despite the fact that many English teachers still focus on US or UK culture in class, English Language Teaching (ELT) has not been primarily concerned with the teaching of culture *per se*, since it has seen itself as teaching a language of economic opportunity, not tied to any particular national or regional space or history (for reviews, see Kramsch, 2009a, 2010; also, Pennycook, and Gray, this volume). Some educators have felt that English is a (culture-free) skill that anyone can appropriate and make his/her own. Indeed, 20 years ago, Henry Widdowson eloquently argued that the ownership of English was not (or was no longer) the prerogative of the so-called ‘native speaker’. He wrote:

“You are proficient in a language to the extent that you possess it, make it your own, bend it to your will, assert yourself through it rather than simply submit to the dictates of its form ... Real proficiency is when you are able to take possession of the language, turn it to your advantage, and make it real for you. This is what mastery means” (Widdowson, 1994: 384). Widdowson decried the discriminatory employment practices in ELT that privileged educated native speakers, i.e., speakers for whom the English language was tightly bound with a native Anglophone culture. (However, the delinking of ELT from the native speaker model for learners of English has not eliminated the privileging of native speakers as teachers of English around the world (i.e. native speakerism, Holliday, 2006; see also Llurda, and Holliday, this volume), nor, in many places, the privileging of native-speaker varieties of English in the ELT classroom, as we shall see).

Since the 1990s, the link between language and culture has become more complex due to the global mobility of capital, goods, and people, and to the growing multilingualism of human communication, both in face-to-face and in online environments. English is not, in fact, a culture-free language, which people can just appropriate for themselves and use as a tool to get things done. It bears traces of the cultural contexts in which it has been used, and contributes to shaping the identity of speakers of English. Making the language your own is already a difficult enterprise linguistically, but the process is rendered more problematic by the pressure in the media, the film industry, social networks, and popular culture to adopt consumerist lifestyles associated with the use of English as a global language. For many learners of English, these lifestyles might remain out of reach.

Thus, today, there are four ways of conceiving of the link between language and culture in ELT:

- As language of interest in or identification with Anglo-saxon culture - a language taught in schools around the world, which, like other national languages, is attached to the national culture of English-speaking nation states, e.g. British English taught in French secondary schools.
- As language of aspiration with a multinational culture of modernity, progress and prosperity. This is the language of the ‘American Dream’, Hollywood, and pop culture that is promoted

by the multinational U.S. and U.K. textbook industry, e.g. ESL taught to immigrants in the U.S. and the U.K., or in secondary schools in Hungary, Iraq and the Ukraine.

- As language of communication with a global culture of entrepreneurial and cosmopolitan individuals, e.g. English-as-a-skill taught in China, English taught at business language schools in Europe.
- Spanglish, Singlish, Chinglish and other multilingual, hybrid forms of English as language of diaspora, travel, worldliness, resistance or entertainment (e.g. Lam, 2009; Pennycook, 2010).

Each of these forms of English is associated with learners from different classes, genders, race and ethnicities, with different aspirations and purposes. And there is, of course, some overlap in the Englishes learners need, learn and use depending on the conditions on the ground. For example, some learners might entertain aspirations of modernity and prosperity as well as an identification with Anglo-saxon culture, and some learners might, in addition to standard British or American English, also use hybrid forms of English as bridges to other, less modern or equally modern, cultures. Additionally, given the transnational training of many English teachers in Anglophone countries like the UK, US, Australia or New Zealand, the distinction between English as a foreign, second or international language is sometimes difficult to uphold; for example, when Hungary's national school system hires British-trained or native English teachers, and uses British textbooks to teach English in Hungarian public schools, is British English being taught as a foreign language to Hungary, or as an international second language or *lingua franca*?

Thus, English both facilitates global citizenship and prompts a return to local forms of community membership. It can serve to liberate learners from their own oppressive historical and cultural past (e.g. Germany) by standing for democracy, progress, and modernity or by offering the prospect of a cosmopolitan future. It can also trigger renewed pride in local cultures perceived as countering the instrumental and profit making culture of globalization (Duchêne and Heller, 2012). Furthermore, the link between language and culture in ELT has moved from a view of (national or multinational) speech communities to communities of local practice and loose networks of language users (Kanno and Norton, 2003; Pennycook, this volume). These associations of learners and speakers of English, in many ways, resemble “imagined (national)

communities” (Anderson, 1983) and offer transient, multiple, sometimes genuine and sometimes illusory friendships that replace the deep, horizontal comradeship offered and taken-for-granted by the nation-state. These associations are reflected upon within the field of Intercultural Communication.

### **A new emphasis on intercultural communication**

Language learning and teaching is an interpersonal and intercultural process whereby learners come into contact with teachers and other learners of diverse personal histories, experiences and outlooks either face-to-face or virtually. Language learning and teaching thus has close connections with the field of Intercultural Communication (ICC), in particular where the notion of culture is concerned.

#### *From culture-as-nation to interculturality*

Whilst having its roots in anthropology, ICC as a field of inquiry was established out of concerns for national security in the post-second world war period during the 1950s. The scholarly interest of that time was predominantly in understanding non-verbal and verbal aspects of communication of ‘cultural’ groups, which were used exchangeably with nationalities or indigenous people. In the 1970s and 80s, the scope of the field diversified to include interethnic and interracial communication (e.g. ‘interethnic’ in Scollon and Scollon, 1981; ‘interracial’ in Rich, 1974, and Blubaugh and Pennington, 1976). The change was the result of shifts of interests from building relationships with people from other cultures, including the cultures of enemy states, to addressing social tensions and understanding interactions among different races, ethnicities, gender, social classes or groups within a society. In the 1980s and 90s, however, ICC research became dominated by the comparative and positivist paradigms of cross-cultural psychology, in which culture is defined solely in terms of nationality, and one culture is compared with another using some generalized constructs (e.g. Hofstede, 1991). Many broad, categorical terms used at the time in describing national cultures (e.g. individualism vs. collectivism, high- vs. low-power distance, masculinity vs. femininity, high vs. low uncertainty avoidance) have, in simplified and reductive form, taken root in public discourse and regularly

appear in training manuals and workshops for people whose work may put them in direct contact with others of different nationalities. There were exceptions to this approach, however. Some publications (e.g. Scollon and Scollon, 1995; Meeuwis, 1994) began to question the notion of ‘culture’ and the nature of cultural differences and memberships. These studies challenge the practice of ‘cultural account’ which attributes misunderstanding in intercultural communication to cultural differences, and also raise the issues of stereotyping and overgeneralization.

Since the 2000s, the field of ICC has shifted away from the comparative and culture-as-nation paradigm. Noticeable trends include a continued interest in deconstructing cultural differences and membership through interculturality studies in which scholars seek to interpret how participants make aspects of their identities, in particular, socio-cultural identities relevant or irrelevant to interactions through symbolic resources including, but not solely, language (e.g. Higgins, 2007; Sercombe and Young, 2010; Zhu Hua, 2014). Scholars from a number of disciplines such as sociolinguistics, critical discourse studies, education, ethnicity studies, communication studies, and diaspora studies, have called for a critical examination of the way larger structures of power (e.g. situated power interests; historical contextualization; global shifts and economic conditions; politicised identities in terms of race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, region, socioeconomic class, generation, and diasporic positions) impact on intercultural communication (e.g. Nakayama and Halualani, 2010; Piller, 2011).

### *From being to doing culture: a discourse perspective to ICC*

One significant new emphasis within ICC, which is the most relevant to language learning/teaching and to ELT, is a discourse perspective to understanding how culture is produced or made (ir)relevant to interactions, by whom, and why (e.g. Scollon and Scollon, 1995, 2001; Piller, 2012; Zhu Hua, 2014). The discourse perspective, as Scollon and Scollon (2001: 543-4) explain, approaches intercultural communication as ‘interdiscourse’ communication, i.e. the interplay of various discourse systems - based on, for example, gender, age, profession, corporate membership, religion, or ethnicity - and focuses on the co-constructive aspects of communication and social change. The insights offered through this perspective are, first of all, that culture is not given, static or something you belong to or live with, but something one does,

or, as Street described it, “culture is a verb” (1993: 25). Treating culture as a verb means that one should not think of participants as representative of the group they are associated with and start with cultural labels they are assigned to (e.g. American vs. Japanese). Rather, the focus should be on the process of meaning-making, that is, on what people do and how they do it through discourse (e.g. whether or how one orients to Japaneseness or Americanness in interactions) (Scollon et al, 2012).

The second insight from the discourse perspective is that discourse systems (including that of culture, gender, profession, religion, the workplace, or the classroom) are multiple, intersect with each other and sometimes contradict each other, as a reflection of the multiplicity and scope of identities that people bring along to or bring about through interactions. The identities that people ‘bring along’ are the knowledge, beliefs, memories, aspirations, worldviews they have acquired by living in a particular cultural community. The identities they ‘bring about’ in their interactions with native and non-native speakers emerge through the construction, perpetuation or subversion of established cultures through discourse (Baynham, 2015). They have been called *master, interactional, relational* and *personal* identities (Tracy, 2002), *imposed, assumed* and *negotiable* identities (Pavlenko and Blackledge, 2003), *audible, visible* and *readable* identities (Zhu Hua, 2014), or self-oriented or prescribed- by-others identities (Zhu Hua, 2014). Therefore it is important to ask the question how a particular kind of identity (e.g. cultural identity) is brought into interactions rather than, for example, how Americans and Japanese speak differently.

The third insight brought by the discourse perspective is that intercultural communication is a *social* (inter-)action – a series of interrelated actions mediated by ideologies, societal structures, power (im)balances, self-ascribed and other-prescribed identities, memories, experiences, accumulated cultural knowledge, imagination, contingencies, and the combined forces of globalisation and local adaptation and resistance. Seeing intercultural communication as a social (inter)action means that we can no longer assume that the problems experienced in intercultural communications are merely cultural misunderstandings which can be made good or pre-empted if people can somehow see ‘good intentions’ in each other’s actions or have sufficient cultural information or skills. These problems require intercultural competence, i.e., the ability to put

yourself into someone else's shoes, see the world the way they see it, and give it the meaning they give it based on shared human experience. And we should remember that parties involved in intercultural communication are not necessarily in an equal power relationship and they may not share similar access to resources and skills (e.g. linguistic skills, among others).

The discourse perspective to ICC raises questions about current practices in language learning and teaching. It decenters the notion of culture in the type of interactions that are usually described in textbooks and studied in the classroom, and which are usually described as 'intercultural communication'; argues that not all the problems in intercultural communication are cultural; and moves away from *who* are involved in interactions and turns attention to the questions of *how* and *why* (i.e. how culture is done and made (ir)relevant, and for what purposes). It calls for an approach beyond the current integrated language-and-culture teaching practice which tries to integrate culture-as-discourse at all levels of language teaching. A case has been made: while it is important to know where the 'cultural faultlines' are (the term used by Kramsch, 2003; for example, the different reactions of the American and the German media to the 9/11 attacks in the USA), it is not good enough to explain everything a German or an American says by referring to their 'German' or 'American' culture. What is more important is the larger picture and a critical understanding of what is going on in social interactions *in situ* and how meaning is made, identities are negotiated, 'culture' is brought in and relationships are transformed discursively. What seems to be missing from communicative or task-based language teaching is a process- and context-oriented approach that is politically and ideologically sensitive, that goes beyond the here-and-now of problem-solving and the negotiation of immediate tasks, and that raises historical and political consciousness.

### **Current issues and key areas of debate**

This section reviews some issues raised by the view of culture as a context-oriented process that is at once politically and ideologically sensitive, and the debates that ensue. It reviews four current areas of debate.

#### *Culture as historical context*

It is a sign of the times that the head of a Department of Anthropology at an American university was overheard saying that anthropology these days is not about “studying culture, but studying historicity and subjectivity”. As global technologies have made it possible to communicate with more and more people across space, the differences in the way people interpret historical events has become more visible and more intractable. For example, World War II is remembered differently by Americans and Russians, the Holocaust is interpreted differently by Israelis and Iranians, national security surveillance has a different meaning for Americans and Germans, and the Korean War is talked about differently in North and South Korea. To what extent, when and how is history relevant to interactions among individuals, even though they might all speak English?

This renewed attention to discourse “as the repository of cultural memory” (Freadman, 2014) has prompted some foreign language educators to suggest placing storytelling and story listening at the core of language instruction. Indeed, language teachers are now encouraged to use spoken and written narrative in their classes, not just in order to make learners talk and practice their grammar, but in order to make visible the invisible layers of history that constitute learners’ experience and the subjective choices they make each time they narrate events (Kramsch, 2009c; Kramsch and Huffmaster 2015).

### *Culture as both structure and agency*

There are nowadays more non-native speakers of English around the world than there are native speakers (Graddol, 1997; see also Seargeant, this volume). Native speakers themselves live in multicultural societies, or live abroad as expatriates with indeterminate cultural affinities. National cultures are being infiltrated by a global culture that speaks global English but might making meaning differently from English native speakers, and whose cultural points of reference are multiple, and changing. The large scale migrations ushered in by a globalized economy combined with the advent of global social networks have led to the interpenetration of national, regional and ethnic cultures, and to their hybridization. It is no longer sufficient to teach the pragmatics, sociolinguistics and semiotics of monolingual white middle-class speakers of British

or American English. Applied linguists are now urging language teachers to teach stylistic variation (e.g., Pennycook, 2010), and to make their students aware of the different meanings that words have in the mouths of different people: for example, younger and older speakers, academics and businessmen, or city dwellers and rural residents. They are also advocating teaching their students how to operate between languages in the form of ‘translanguaging’ (Garcia, 2009) or ‘translingual practice’ (Canagarajah, 2013) and other multilingual practices where English is combined with other languages to make meaning (see also Pennycook, this volume). These multilingual practices correspond to multicultural worldviews that are indexed by the linguistic codes used at any given time. Culture has to be seen as an agentive, discursive process that constructs new speaker or writer identities. For example, an immigrant learner of English might present a ‘narratorial self’ (Kramsch, 2009c:73) when telling his/her story in English that might be different from the same story told to a relative in his/her native language (Norton, 2000). Teachers are now encouraged to let their students use their native languages in conjunction with English to express meanings they could not express in only one language (Canagarajah, 2013; see also Kerr, this volume).

But at the same time, culture has a material structure that cannot be ignored. There is, as David Block puts it, a tension between culture as *agency* and culture as *structure*. Culture is not only co-constructed by social actors with motivations and agency but also is made of institutions, practices and material interactions that constrain individual agency (Block, 2013). Block argues that structure and agency are mediated by the human capacity for reflexivity. For English language teachers, such reflexivity should be applied not only to grammatical or lexical structures, but also to the historical ‘conditions of possibility’ of social and cultural events. For example, teaching students how to write a statement of purpose for admission to an American university requires teaching them not only how to write correct grammar and spelling, but how to use culturally appropriate phrases such as *setting and achieving goals*, *overcoming adversity*, *showing leadership skills*. These phrases index a certain entrepreneurial culture made of individual tenacity and high achievement, which the teacher should help the students recognize and understand. However, teaching culture is not giving them a recipe for success. It is not because English learners use these appropriate phrases that they will necessarily get admitted.

They must also learn about their highly unequal chances of success at American universities depending on their race, ethnicity, gender, and geographical origin

### *Language and thought*

The Sapir-Whorf hypothesis (Whorf, 1956), which argues that the language we speak shapes the way we perceive the world and that our culture influences the way we think (Kramsch, 2004), is still eminently relevant to the teaching of English. On the one hand, it makes sense that the language in which we were socialized should have an influence on the way we think of things and events. If native speakers of American English talk about ‘challenges’ and ‘opportunities’ rather than problems and fate, it is because the former evoke a can-do mentality that they may share with other American speakers. On the other hand, it is not certain that learners of English as a second or foreign language acquire a can-do mentality just by learning the lexical item ‘challenge’. Indeed, should they be taught to adopt such a mentality? Or should they merely recognize and understand it when they hear native speakers use the word? Educators are divided on this issue and they are rightly wary of stereotypes.

This language relativity hypothesis confronts the language teacher with the double task of teaching both linguistic form and living discourse meaning. If culture consists of “common standards for perceiving, believing, and evaluating events” (see above), then teachers are responsible for teaching not only the dictionary meanings of words, but also the cognitive and affective values of these words and how they potentially channel a speaker’s perceptions of social reality. Recent advances in cognitive linguistics shed light on precisely this aspect of language and culture. For example, cognitive linguists like George Lakoff (1996) remind us that the public can be manipulated into believing that ‘torture’ is merely an ‘enhanced interrogation technique’ and thus does not protest.. Learners of English can be reminded by teachers that words do not change meaning on their own; they can be made to change meaning in order to arouse different emotions and thus serve different political interests. This is exactly what a culture-as-discourse approach encourages teachers to do (see discussion above).

### *Language and online cultures*

As learners of English around the world increasingly use computer-mediated communication (CMC) on the Internet and through social networks, English language educators generally welcome this opportunity to have their students use English for real-world purposes to connect with the rest of the world online (e.g. Danet, 1998; Gardner and Davis, 2013; Grasmuck et al., 2009). But they also have growing concerns regarding the transferability of communicative skills from online to face-to-face interactions, the nature of online vs. offline identities, the risks involved with the loss of privacy, and the addictive nature of the medium.

Research on CMC in the last thirty years has shown that online communication can enhance both the quantity and the quality of the language produced by language learners, it makes them less timorous to voice their opinions and enables them to make friendships they would not normally make in the intimidating environment of a classroom (e.g., Lam, 2000, 2009, 2013; also, Kern, Ware and Warschauer, this volume). For example, the Chinese adolescent immigrants studied in the U.S. by Eva Lam, who connect online with a variety of interlocutors around Japanese anime comics or global hip hop, find a way to improve their English and to create for themselves a 'third culture' (Kramsch, 2009b) in cyberspace. This third culture satisfies their emotional and aesthetic needs and enables them to eschew the discrimination they experience in real life.

However, many educators are concerned that online environments like Facebook or Instagram foster a culture of narcissism and personal display that is not conducive to the development of any deep communicative competence. Rather than connect people, such environments risk isolating them in communities of like-minded peers, makes them vulnerable to electronic surveillance, and makes them addicted to peer approbation and peer pressure. The challenge for ELT professionals is to balance these concerns with the evident opportunities for learning and personal development which online communication offers.

The four areas of debate surveyed above reflect the changing nature of culture in ELT, as culture becomes denationalized, deterritorialized, decontextualized and associated with language use in real and virtual environments across social, ethnic, gender and generational boundaries, rather than in terms of uniform or homogeneous national or state cultures.

## **Future developments and implications for ELT practitioners**

*How useful is the notion of culture for ELT practitioners? How shall language students, teachers and researchers engage with it?*

There are many challenges in engaging with the notion of culture in language learning and teaching. The biggest hurdle, in our opinion, is how to translate the denationalized, deterritorialized and decontextualized forms of culture into classroom practice, when culture is still seen by many teachers “as a geographically, and quite often nationally, distinct entity, as relatively unchanging and homogenous, and as all-encompassing systems of rules or norms that substantially determine personal behavior” (Atkinson, 1999: 626). Additionally, for many researchers, national and linguistic groupings and memberships such as ‘Chinese learners’, ‘Arabic speakers’, ‘Japanese students’, continue to feature prominently either as a research context or as a contrasting variable. There is also reluctance or resistance towards teaching and learning culture in the classroom. When being asked their views on having ‘Chinese culture’ taught in the Chinese language class, one student reported that “I don’t want to waste time in the class to be taught something that I can read on the internet” (Zhu Hua and Li Wei, 2014), and some language teachers feel their mandate is to teach language, not culture.

Despite such challenges, culture as a process of meaning making itself has been and is still being used as a useful concept in language learning and teaching. Culture is getting both ‘smaller’ and ‘bigger’. It is no longer the big C culture of literature and the arts, or the culture of anthropologists or sociologists, but the way of life and everyday behaviors of speakers, readers and writers in daily communication (i.e. small culture). At the same time, paradoxically, culture is getting bigger and operates on a global scale (e.g. see the discussion on cultural globalisation in Kumaravadelu, 2008). It manifests itself through different discourse levels, semiotic forms, verbal and non-verbal modalities, and voices, and varies across time and contexts. Through the way we do things, new culture comes into being. Precisely due to its simultaneously open and bounded, reference-providing and reference-developing nature, we need to talk about culture more to understand how it works. A possible way forward, at the conceptual level, is to use

culture “not as one thing or another, not as a thing at all, but rather as a heuristic ... a tool for thinking” (Scollon et al., 2012). At the analytical level, culture can be used as an interpretive, reflexive, historically grounded and politically sensitive lens to interpret differences or similarities experienced, perceived or constructed by social actors. At the operational level, culture is there to remind English language teachers that even though their students might use English words, these words might mean different things for them, evoke different memories, and make sense of the world in different ways. It also invites them to distrust the ready-made meanings of the dictionary, to teach sociolinguistic variation and to help their students interpret the meaning of these variations.

*How useful for language teachers is the notion of ‘intercultural competence’ as it is defined, used or sometimes idealised in the current literature?*

Intercultural competence is a term defined, refined and debated across several disciplines including language and intercultural education, communication studies, interpersonal communication studies, and international business and management studies (see, for example, Bennett, 1993; Byram, 1997; Risager, 2007; Byram and Hu, 2009). While the plethora of definitions and assessments of intercultural competence indicates its popularity among both ELT researchers and English teachers in many parts of the world, it also raises questions: Why is it so difficult to pin down intercultural competence? Do such abstract notions as ‘tolerance’ and ‘respect’ mean the same to different people or in different contexts?

The biggest problem with the various interpretations of intercultural competence is that they are underpinned by ‘static’ and essentialized notions of culture and competence. Culture-specific knowledge is often mentioned as if it exists in the form of objective facts and can, therefore, be gleaned from books in the library or on the internet as well as taught and relayed from one person to another. The question is: what is culture-specific knowledge? When people tell you: ‘Chinese people do not open the gift in front of you and tend to decline gifts three times before accepting them’, who are the Chinese people they have in mind? Are they reifying stereotypes and offering a reductionist profiling? How is the allegedly ‘traditional’ practice typical of the

practice of the group it is associated with? In what way does it represent common practice, not a practice constructed or desired? And how current is the practice?

Similarly, the notion of competence is often treated as ‘static’, as something given. In fact, whether someone is competent or incompetent is very often a matter of ascription, either by speakers themselves or others in interactions. In Jiang and Zhu’s work on children’s interaction in an international summer camp (2010), a boy who is an L2 speaker of English found himself perceived to be less communicatively competent than another girl with a similar language background because he was ‘quiet’ in activities. Once the perception was formed, other participants in the activities kept asking the girl to translate for the boy. This example shows that the perception of belonging to a foreign culture is not the result of a linguistic deficiency, but a social construction based on ideological values such as team spirit and participation.

These challenges raise the question of whether the notion of culture can be defined, modeled, or benchmarked, indeed, whether it is possible to capture the essence of what is needed in intercultural interactions at all. As various researchers have shown (e.g. Kramsch and Whiteside, 2008; Kramsch, 2009c; Dervin, 2010; Clark and Dervin, 2014), what is needed for ELT practitioners is greater historical and political awareness, greater reflexivity in order to help learners understand the power dynamic behind intercultural exchanges, and the historical and symbolic components of what has been called ‘symbolic competence’ (Kramsch, 2009c) to supplement ‘intercultural competence’.

*How can we reclaim English as a language with a heart by attaching it neither to global economic interests, nor to national hegemonies, but to the deep aspirations of socially and historically situated social actors?*

The current trend both towards more globalization and towards renewed nationalist ideologies poses a challenge to English teachers, who want to respond to the enormous demand for English as the language of technological modernity and economic prosperity, but do not necessarily want to be associated with Anglo-American imperialism and the resurgent nationalist ideologies of English-speaking countries. The research reviewed above has broadened the concept of culture

and intercultural communication to include many aspects that are not covered by a narrow definition of culture as the way of life, attitudes and opinions, foods, fairs, and folklores of a nation's citizens. If culture is now seen as encompassing much larger historical processes - the memories and aspirations of people who identify themselves not necessarily by their nationality, but by their language variety, their gender, race, ethnicity, age, or occupation - then culture, thus understood, is likely to affect the way speakers of English use the English language. In this case, the Chinese learner of English who thought he could learn culture by consulting the internet (see above) might wonder why, when conversing with a native speaker, he still does not understand what the native speaker is saying, even though he can comprehend every word, nor why he seems to have offended his interlocutor, even though his grammar was perfect. Indeed, what he can get from the internet is the WHAT of culture: the facts, information, explanations, and expert advice on things to say or not to say. What he cannot get from the internet is the WHY: Why are people offended by what I have said? Why did they get so upset by what I have done? Why do they attach so much importance to particular things, people or events? It is not enough to understand people's words, opinions and feelings - one has to understand their intensity.

The task of English language teachers is to decide which aspect of culture, understood as a process, might be relevant to understanding this intensity. The growing complexity of global real-life encounters has increased the spatial and temporal scale of events English learners need to understand and put in relation with one another, in order to achieve 'successful' communication. The training of English teachers thus increasingly requires training in semiotic awareness, discourse analysis and interpretation.

*How to manage the relationship between English and the other languages?*

One of the things English learners now have to learn is when to use English and when to use other languages, with whom, and on which topic. English, by its global nature, makes it possible to communicate with more people than ever, but it does not necessarily enable people to understand other people's motives, memories and aspirations. These are embedded in the language or language varieties in which their speakers were raised, socialized, and schooled, and in which they express their innermost aspirations. Like virtual technology, English creates a

platform on which all other languages can be learned and used. But the very global spread of English makes it also possible to see how limiting English might be if it is used as the sole language, 'the only game in town'. English as a global language can be at its most useful as a supplement, not as a replacement, of other local languages; in fact, it needs other languages to grow and change, like any other living language.

It is an ultimate irony that in order to promote understanding across cultures, English teachers must teach not English as it is spoken by monolingual nationals, but English as a social semiotic system that mediates between global form and local thought, national and transnational interpretations of history, collective and individual apprehensions of reality. And they have to accept that their view of the value of English might not be the same as their students' views.

### **Discussion questions**

- How far do you agree that learning another language implies learning another culture?
- Can you give an example of how you deal with culture in your teaching or language learning?
- What is your view on the relationship between English and culture in ELT? Is English as culture-free global lingua franca, or is it a language attached to a culture 'made in the west' but with global reach?
- To what extent do you think it is possible for teachers to focus on developing learners' 'intercultural communicative competence'? Do you think that ICC is a useful concept in your professional context?
- Think of a particular group of learners you have taught, to what extent will they engage multilingual practices in the future? How, where and when will they use English?
- Think of a time when you got really upset when someone from a different culture voiced opinions that were radically opposed to yours and that offended your moral system of values. How did you find out what the miscommunication was due to and how did you deal with it?

### **Related topics**

Appropriate methodology; Communicative language teaching in theory and practice; Computer-mediated communication and language learning; ELT materials; 'Native speakers', English and ELT; Power, politics and ELT; World Englishes and English as a Lingua Franca.

### **Further reading**

Kramsch, C. (1998) *Language and Culture*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. (Using insights from linguistics, sociology and anthropology, this book gives an overview of this field of research together with selected readings, study questions and annotated references.)

Kramsch, C. (2015) 'Language and culture'. *AILA Review*, 27. 30-55. (This essay gives an up-to-date overview of the methodology used to study language and culture in applied linguistics.)

Scollon, R., Scollon, S. W., and Jones, R. H. (2012) *Intercultural Communication: A Discourse Approach* (3<sup>rd</sup> edition). Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell. (The recently updated edition provides an introduction to the discourse approach to intercultural communication.)

Kumaravadivelu, B. (2008) *Cultural Globalisation and Language Education*. New Haven: Yale University Press. (The book explores the impact of cultural globalisation on language education, and critiques how western notions of cultural assimilation, pluralism and hybridity impact the way culture is constructed in language classrooms.)

Zhu H. (2014) *Exploring Intercultural Communication: Language in Action*. London: Routledge. (The book examines how intercultural communication permeates our everyday life, what we can do to achieve effective and appropriate intercultural communication and why we study language, culture and identity together.)

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