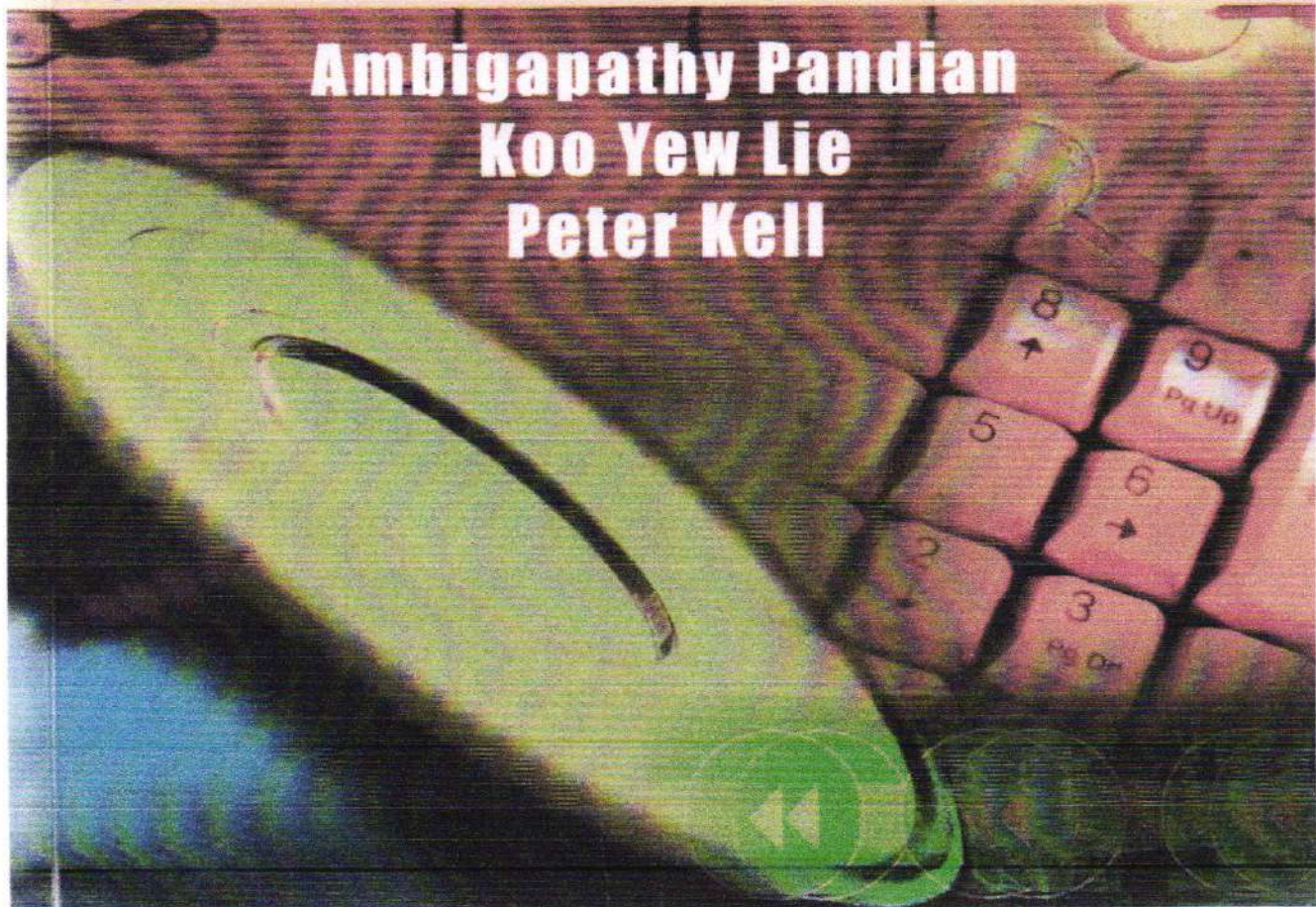


INNOVATION and **INTERVENTION** in **ELT**

Pathways & Practices

**Ambigapathy Pandian
Koo Yew Lie
Peter Kell**



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Universiti Putra Malaysia Press
Serdang • 2007

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First Print 2007

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UPM Press is a member of the Malaysian Book Publishers Association (MABOPA)
Membership No: 9802.

Perpustakaan Negara Malaysia Malaysia Cataloguing in Publication

Innovation and intervention in ELT: pathways and practices / editors

Ambigapathy Pandian, Koo Yew Lie, Peter Kell.

Includes index

Bibliography: p.

ISBN 978-967-5026-04-1

1. English language--Study and teaching (Higher). 2. Language and languages--Study and teaching (Higher). I. Ambigapathy Pandian.

II. Koo, Yew Lie. III. Kell, Peter.

428.20711

Type face: AGaramond

Type size: 12/14

Direct orders to

University Putra Malaysia Press

43400 UPM Serdang

Selangor Darul Ehsan

Tel: 03-8946 8851/ 8854

Fax: 03-8941 6172

E-mail: penerbit@putra.upm.edu.my

Printed by

University Putra Malaysia Press

43400 UPM Serdang

Selangor Darul Ehsan

Contents

Preface	ix
Introduction	
<i>Ambigapathy Pandian, Koo Yew Lie & Peter Kell</i>	xi
1. English for All: Reflections and Best Practices <i>Ambigapathy Pandian</i>	1
2. Talking Texts: A Reflection of Social Realities in Communication <i>Chan Swee Heng, Helen Tan & Lee Geok Imm</i>	16
3. Mindful Pluriliteracy (PL) for Multilingual Learners: Sustaining Diverse Cultures in Languages and Literacy Education <i>Koo Yew Lie</i>	26
4. Developing Culture Sensitive Language Instructional Activity: Affirming Culture Contribution to English Language Teaching <i>Athriyana Pattiwael</i>	46
5. Teaching Development of Two Teachers of English in Pakistan <i>Ayesha Bashiruddin</i>	61
6. An Attempt on Fusion Education between Science and the Humanities: In the Case of e-Robots and English Learning by Japanese School Children <i>Hitoshi Matsubara, Masato Honma, Masayuki Hata, Takeshi Osanai & Taku Osanai</i>	87
7. The Lighthouse Literacy Project: RCPJ's Contribution to English Language Teaching and Learning in Malaysia. <i>Eric Wong Tat Koon</i>	95
8. Using Visuals in Teacher Education <i>Gitu Chakravarthy</i>	104

9. Autonomy in ESL: To What Extent? <i>Muhammad Kamarul Kabilan & Naginder Kaur</i>	133
10. Content-Based Instruction in The Malaysian Context: What Challenges Do Teachers Face? <i>Harshita Aini Haroon & Arsaythamby Veloo</i>	147
11. The Creative Thinking Abilities of Tesl Student Teachers of a Public University in Malaysia <i>Baharuddin Bin Aris, Jamaluddin Bin Harun & Tan Choon Keong</i>	161
12. Curriculum for Literacy in English: Teacher's Perspective <i>Nazima Versay Kudus</i>	175
13. Can Do Profiles: A Sustainable Approach to Nurturing Young Writers <i>Linda Thompson</i>	187
14. Adult Learners' Characteristics and Their Anxiety in On-line Language Learning <i>Faizah Abd Majid, Siti Hawa Othman & Khairezan Rahmat</i>	201
15. The Role of Writing in Shaping Thinking: Rediscovering New Applications to an Old Idea <i>Shahizan Shaharuddin</i>	224
16. Writing Implications for Practical Applications: A Genre-Based Investigation into Researchers' Rhetorical and Linguistic Strategies <i>Jason Miin-Hwa Lim</i>	249
17. Investigating the EFL Learners' Reactions to Teacher Written Comments <i>Ambigapathy Pandian & Omer Hassan Mahfoodh</i>	269
18. Posing a Problem and Making a Claim: Analysing Argumentative Essays in the Preparation of Teaching Materials <i>May Siaw-Mei Liu & Jason Miin-Hwa Lim</i>	288

19. Investigating Oral and Written Communication Strategies:
A Need for a Better Language Teaching 311
Reza Pasha Moghimizeade & Ambigapathy Pandian
20. Using English as the Medium of Communication in Intranet
Writing: A Survey of Undergraduate Students at a Technical 319
University in Northern Malaysia
*Ahmad Nazri Abdullah, Irma Ahmad Rozilawati Mahadi &
Sharmini Abdullah*
21. Adding a Touch of Zest to Speaking 330
Sarah Abedi Abdullah
22. Encouraging Talk among ESL Students via Small Group
Decision Making 345
Zuraidah Ali
23. Using Problem-Based Learning (PBL) Approach to Promote
ESL Students' Vocabulary Development 358
Zamnah Husin
24. Test Taker Characteristics: Factors That Affect Performance 372
Laura Christ Dass & Saidatul Akmar Zainal Abidin
25. Sir Thomas Stamford Raffles: A Colonial Orientalist or Humanist? 385
Norun Najjah Ahmat
26. Graphophonemic Analysis as a Sound Identification Strategy for
Arab EFL learners 398
Abdulghani M. A. Al-Shaebi & Norbisham Binti Mohamad

4

Developing Culture Sensitive Language Instructional Activity: Affirming Culture Contribution to English Language Teaching

Athriyana Pattiwael

Introduction

The teaching of language and culture is believed to have an inter-relational relationship for the teaching of a language is also the teaching of its culture. Language teaching does not only provide the students with language competence and communication skills but developing their social (cultural) skills in terms of using language appropriately. Yet, how deep culture is being explored and positioned appropriately to ensure ESL/EFL classroom fulfill its objective? Culture's position in the instructional activity, in terms of its content, its teaching methodology, its objective of inclusion in instructional activity, is influenced by the internal and external context of ESL/EFL classroom.

English has shown its omnipresence by depicting itself as a language which has its origins in a small island. Presently, it has more than 1.5 billion speakers worldwide. Due to its ever-expanding use, it has become the lingua franca of newly-independent and developing nations. Using the channels of international business and cyberspace, English has spread widely and has more non-native speakers than the native one (Komin 1998). In addition, it is the main language of international institutions (Lie 2002). Yet, its tremendous power exerts today has not been without cost to a number of other languages (Renner 1994). Controversial issues related to the English teaching worldwide are its presumed

formation of elitist cultural groups, widening the gap between the “haves” and the “have nots”, impeding literacy in mother tongue languages and threatening local cultures. In some places, its presence and role call for cultural protection of local contexts. This external context has influenced the existence of culture in EFL/ESL classroom.

The nature of English as international language determines the role of culture in teaching learning process. McKay argues that the role of culture in teaching an international language needs to be significantly different from the role of culture in teaching other languages (2005). Smith (1976, cited in McKay 2005) asserts the relationship of an international language and culture:

- a. Learners of an international language do not need to internalize the cultural norms of native speakers of that language.
- b. The ownership of an international language becomes “de-nationalized”.
- c. The educational goal of learning an international language is to enable learners to communicate their ideas and culture to others.

If an international language belongs to no single culture, then it seems that it is not necessary for language learners to acquire knowledge about the culture of those who speak it as a native language. However, some argue that teaching language could not be separated from its culture. Students are not only expected to acquire accurate forms of target language, but also to learn how to use these forms in given social-cultural situation in the target language setting (Alptekin, 2002). Therefore the knowledge of target culture is one of required cultural knowledge to be a successful language user.

These two backgrounds influence the existence of culture in ELT classroom in terms of how it should be positioned, what culture content should be presented and what teaching methodology should be used. If culture is not managed and exploited properly, through appropriate, stereotyping, misconception will appear. This paper argues that second language learning and teaching will benefit from the appropriate management and exploitation of cultural issues. The discussion will be opened with the examination of some choices of culture content in order to determine what culture content could be presented in the classroom. It will be followed by some accounts on how culture differences are managed.

Finally, some ideas on how to assist and support students when they come into contact with new culture would be shared.

Bringing Culture in the Classroom: What and Whose Culture?

English is spoken by billions of people worldwide but when opening a EFL/ESL textbook, *whose culture is presented?* In all probability, the culture content presented are mainstream of British or North American. Mainstream content means dominant culture of the majority groups, , are the central of the discussion whereas minority groups are excluded from the content objectives.

The culture content of the textbook and teaching materials is seen as ideology (Cortazzi and Jin, 1999), in the sense that they reflect a worldview or cultural system, a social construction that may be imposed on unreflective teachers and students and that indirectly constructs their view of a dominant culture. Valdes (1990. cited in Baker 2003) shares the same account that every lesson is about something and that something is cultural. Unfortunately, this aspect often passes unrecognized when teachers decide on the culture content to be included in the textbook and teaching material.

Further, they propose three patterns in English textbooks and teaching materials reflecting cultures: target culture materials, source culture materials and international culture materials. Each of the patterns present benefits and disadvantages which are related to the role and contribution of culture to the teaching learning process, the achievement of students' goal in learning English and the building of students' intercultural competence. We will examine each of the patterns and see how these patterns are used in the ELT.

■ **Source culture materials** refer to materials which has content focusing on learners' own culture. These source material have its strengths. The involvement of the students tend to be higher since the topic is familiar to and it is in the immediate environment of the students. Besides, the teachers, who come from the source culture, share, at least, the same access and resources to cultural information. McKay (2005) points out that this will help the teachers to secure their problematic position and role, especially for those where students' dominant culture views the teacher as the single provider of communication. These materials are usually designed to help students become aware of and able

to communicate their own cultural identity by using English. This implies a supply of context for learning and using English.

Yet, Cortazzi and Jin (1999) states that even though the students are provided with the context and opportunity to communicate (in English), they can only communicate within their cultural frameworks because they have not encountered cultural alternatives and are therefore likely to carry their home culture with them in their use of English. In such materials, the students see members of their own culture, in their own context, who are not different from themselves, except that they all speak English. They have limited contact and direct encounter with different cultural forms and contexts which require different communicative (cultural) strategies. Further, the students experience limited cultural reflection which is a process involving the students in an objective and subjective reflection of their culture and the culture of others, working towards a choice of their own meanings that best reflect their personal perspectives. In the former case, they are only exposed to their own culture system. They have, therefore, little opportunity to engage in intercultural negotiation with another culture. This is the negotiation where they identify and confirm their own cultural identity, and/or to ascertain its similarities and differences with that of another cultural group.

■ **Target Meaning.** Textbook and teaching materials can also be based on target culture; the culture of the country where English is spoken as the first language. Since the topic presents a kind of new and unfamiliar information about the English-speaking cultures, the students may be interested in learning more. For students whose (one of) the goal of learning English is preparing themselves to encounter activities involving English-speaking people, this content culture brings such a significant contribution.

McKay (2005) argues that some of this kind of materials are largely irrelevant or uninteresting. To some extent this may present cultural conflict for the students. The portray of the member of target cultural group along with their ideas, lifestyle, norm and values may lead to culture homogenization. This can be counter-productive since students who find themselves as the minority will feel threatened culturally (to some extent religiously) and it calls for a defense. Feeling pressured and threatened, people will usually seek refuge in their

primordial identities including the cultural one (Naisbitt 1994 cited in Lie 2002). This cultural – psychological context may hinder learners' development of individual as well as group identities. Lie (2002) points out that it is likely that students who are underrepresented and/or negatively stereotyped in the learning materials are vulnerable to the feeling of ambivalence about their group identification. To some extent, this may be blocks stand in learners' learning process. Cultural conflict may also take place when there is a greater social distance between students' source culture and the culture of the language studied. If they find their culture group the subordinate politically, culturally, technically or economically of the target language (culture) group, the greater the distance between two cultures will be. Schumann (1976, cited in Brown, 2000) points out that the greater the social distance between two cultures, the greater difficulty the students will have in learning the target language. Furthermore, for teachers who come from the source culture that expect them to fulfill their role as the main information provider in the classroom and the main source of the knowledge, this kind of materials will place them in a troubling position if they have limited access to the cultural references and parameters of the topic discussed.

■ **International Target Cultures.** Some other textbooks and teaching materials include a wide variety of cultures set in English-speaking countries or in other countries which are the international target cultures. The uninterested students and the lack of information needed to explain the cultural information in the materials are the disadvantages associated with this kind of material. Yet, some benefits might arise from using this kind of material which are related to the enhancement of students' intercultural competence. When students come into direct contact with other cultures, the opportunities to experience reflective interpretation of their own culture (C1) and the culture of others (C2) will be available. This experience involves the students in an objective and subjective reflection of C1 and C2 from which they must choose their own meanings that best reflect their personal perspectives. By careful and effective management, the teacher may, also, lead the students to the finding of ways in which English is used effectively to communicate with others for international purposes.

In determining what culture content to be presented, the teachers should take into account such considerations as the goal of students' language learning, the context where English is taught and the focus of teaching culture.

The content of target culture might be the appropriate choice if students' goal of learning English is to prepare themselves to come into direct contact with the English-speaking people for different purposes (planned to study, visit or work in English-speaking countries). Enable them to use English according to the culture norms of English-speaking countries will be the goal of the teaching. Therefore, exposing them to the English linguistic level (semantics, pragmatics and rhetoric) which are embedded culturally and helping them to learn it, not only acquire it, will be the concern of classroom activities. Concentrating on the dimensions of aesthetic and sociological as proposed by Adaskou, et.al (1989, cited in McKay 2000), this kind of cultural literacy will prepare and facilitate this group of students for their possible future visit to English-speaking countries. But if it seems that they will remain stay, work or study in their own country whose diverse cultural view (as some Asian countries), the reinforcement of their culture basis will be a more appropriate choice. On this level, English language learning and teaching contribute significant contribution to the preservation of local culture and self (cultural)identity.

However, in the contemporary world, students do not need to travel to encounter members of other cultures. Popular music, the media, high intensity of mobility and tourism, soon, will drive the students to come into contact with others whose different culture background (Cortazzi & Jin 1999). Even though, the students remain to stay in their own country, they would still meet either English-speaking people or others who use English as an international language. It is essential to prepare them with the ability to communicate within the operated cultural system of the language used. An intercultural competence will either enable them to use appropriate language forms enacted in English or appropriate manners in which English is used by non-native speakers of English for international purposes. Therefore, the existence of other cultures, in addition to students' source culture and target culture, in the classroom is highly essential. This will provide both the context and learning experience of different cultural contexts which in turn will boost their awareness of different cultural views.

The context where English is taught also plays an influential role in determining what culture content to be presented in classroom. Classroom operates under the control of bigger and more influential system and ideological system. There is common awareness that with the rapid rate of globalization, there is the danger

of cultural imperialism and the indoctrination of Western culture. The teaching of English is assumed as one of the effective medium through which imperialism and indoctrination are operated. This results to the emergence of a nationalist sentiment to preserve one's own culture. In this context, the teachers should be aware of the role of the culture plays in the teaching and learning English in their country. In addition to teachers' environmental awareness, they could exploit their autonomy in selecting the materials. Concerning learner feelings of being threatened and pressured culturally, the teachers may overcome these fears by balancing the issues of the western/dominant cultures with the local/minority culture issues. Western-centrism should be balanced with the inclusion of the local wisdom. Even though displaying various culture may not be an easy measure considering the vast diversity of the local cultures, it still seems workable to facilitate students' different learning goals and assists English classroom for not classifying itself into the list of the threaten to the ecology of local languages and cultures, yet indicating its contributing role in the preservation of local languages and cultures.

The focus of the teaching will also determine as to what culture content to be presented in the classroom. If the focus of the teaching is to introduce the phonological, lexical (semantic), pragmatic, rhetoric and grammatical system of English, a major emphasis is placed on the target culture. Students are encouraged to grasp the interrelation between language and culture (Harumi 2002). In this focus the students are systematically introduced to (and are expected to recognize) the close ties between certain lexical items, pragmatic sense, rhetorical pattern and the culture norm. They will come to an understanding that those linguistic aspects are well-embedded in English-speaking culture, therefore should be interpreted in the related culture.

If helping the students to become aware of the existence of different cultures is the focus of the teaching, the display of various culture content should be taken place in the classroom. The main concern of this focus is to increase and develop students' intercultural competence. The more exposure and contact to different cultures, the higher awareness of the differences will be. The teachers may freely display all cultural contexts based on the cultural configuration of the class and encourage an inter-culturality – relating first (native) culture to second culture and reflecting on perceptions of them. When learners are given the opportunity

to see their culture from the point of view of another culture, they are able to understand their culture better and see how it interacts with cultures and what are its unique and distinct characteristics. The theme and content-based instruction approach will provide wider room for this purpose. Through this approach, teachers offer students many opportunities to communicate in the target language and provide content (in this case multi-cultural issues) for this communication.

Yet, the display should be accompanied and supported by systematic activities to help the students to become aware of the differences. Otherwise, culture shock or bewilderment, which might lead to the stereotyping of certain cultural groups. If the students are in the elementary stage, the display may focus itself on the level of big c culture (food, festival, traditional clothes, traditional song, literature, artifacts, ect). Later, the small "c" culture, the more essential part of culture yet hard to find, such as values, belief, custom should be displayed to the intermediate students through various kinds of instructional activities (literary analysis, mini ethnographic studies, inviting member of certain culture groups to the class, etc).

Managing Cultural Differences

Incorporating culture in instructional activities will not be free from culture-based problems. The teacher-student and student-student relationship may encounter *cultural bewilderment* or even *culture shock*. The pattern of relationship and interaction which exists in the classroom is a cultural pattern in itself. From an early age, students and teachers are socialized into (cultural) expectation and frame about what a teacher is, what a students is, what kind of interactions are appropriate in the class, how should they engage in teaching and learning processes. This is in line with what McKay (2000) asserts that teachers and students approach the situation with different expectations about their roles and these differences are based both on the teachers' and the students' education outside the classroom and on their previous experience within classroom in different culture. Heath (1984. cited in McKay 2000) stresses that the problem is likely to be greater in classrooms where the teacher and students, belonging to different cultures, bring different ways of believing, behaving and valuing and different expectations about what should occur inside a classroom.

Geert Hofstede (1986, cited in Brown 2002) categorizes four conceptual categories: individualism versus collectivism, power distance, uncertainty avoidance and masculinity-, in which culture shock may evoke in classroom interaction. The concept of *individualism versus collectivism* is the first significant constraint in teaching learning process. Individualist cultures assume that any person looks primarily after his/her own interest and the interest of his/her immediate family. Whereas, collectivist cultures assume that any person through birth and possible later events belongs to one or more tight "in-group" from which he/she cannot detach him/herself. Generally, a collectivist society is tightly integrated; an individualist society is loosely integrated. *Power distance* defines the extent to which the less powerful persons in a society accept inequality in power and consider it as normal. In a high power distance group, each individual must act according to their rank for the whole organization to function harmoniously. The superior (in this case the teacher) is considered superior therefore their power is accepted without questions. On the contrary all individuals are equal in the concept of low power distance group. *Uncertainty avoidance* as a characteristic of a culture defines the extent to which people within a culture are made nervous by situations they perceived as unstructured, unclear and unpredictable situations which they therefore try to avoid. *Masculinity versus femininity* deals with social roles attributed to men and women.

Brown (2002) asserts that differences in teacher/student and student/student interaction and expectation will appear as the impact of the conceptual category they belong to. What a bewilderment or even culture shock a collectivist learner with high power distance may encounter when deal with an individualist teacher. The collectivist learner who is taught culturally to never contradict the teacher, never to speak in class unless spoken to, let the teacher's wisdom be poured into him/her will be bewildered when her/his individualist teacher demand her/her opinion in response to general invitation, giving contradictory ideas and coming up with answers to problems, rather than just giving the answer. The learners who belong to a strong uncertainty avoidance are reluctant in answering due to the fear of giving the wrong answer. They are afraid of the mockery of their classmates, therefore conference style answer will be highly preferred. The teacher with a weak uncertainty avoidance may consider this as a total lack of respect.

The teacher with learners whose cultural backgrounds differ from their own should be aware of the possibility of encountering culture shock in terms of teacher-student and student-student relationship for the learners may find contradictory (cultural) expectation for their (cultural) participation. Yet, culture shock can be viewed positively as a beneficial and profound cross-cultural learning experience. It is a set of situation or circumstances involving intercultural communication in which the learners and teachers, as a result of the experiences, become aware of their own growth, learning and change. Brown (2000) further explains that as a result of culture shock process, the learners and teachers have gained a new perspective on themselves and has come to understand their own identity in term significant to themselves.

There is a caution of simplification measure by generalizing the difference since it will lead to different cultural problem. The students' cultural configuration itself is comprised of diverse culture groups. Take for example the ELT Indonesian classroom. What do we mean by students' source culture (Indonesian culture) may be a generalized picture since one classroom may comprise of more than five culture groups. Categorizing students' source culture bases on nationality will surely result to the denial of cultural diversity of an ELT classroom.

Immediate judgment about students' culture of learning which is led to stereotyping should be avoided. The teacher should base their cultural view about their students' culture of learning on careful studies and extensive classroom observation since classroom interaction and relationship develop dynamically. If we consider classroom interaction is the culture interaction, a dialogic relationship, then the students are progressing in their cultural meaning and identity negotiation. It implies that classroom interaction pattern is a dynamic process and are "framed, negotiated, modified, confirmed, and challenged through interaction with others (Collier & Thomas, 1998 cited in Cortazzi & Jin, 1999).

Helping Students Coping with Acculturation

Concerning cultural background, each student brings with them the cultural mores and patterns of accepted behavior learned in their native culture which may be culturally diverse from their classmates and the teacher's. They arrive with not only their mother tongue but also their ways of interacting and

expressing themselves according to strategies and conventions learnt in their own linguistic and cultural community.

When they learn English (with various culture content) they come into contact with various culture at the same time; the culture of their classmates, the culture of the teacher, and the culture of the textbook and teaching materials. Brown (2002) states that learning second or foreign language involves the acquisition of a second (cultural) identity. The contact with other culture and acquiring second cultural identity lead to culture shock. Unfortunately, this aspect is often neglected during teaching-learning process. Little attention is paid to how support can be provided for students to go through the acculturation process. Besides, students' native culture and cultural experience could be exploited as the source to support the process of second language learning.

As the students begin to lose some of the ties of their native culture and to adapt to the second culture, they experience feelings of chagrin or regret, mixed with the fearful anticipation of entering a new group. They suffer from feelings of social uncertainty or dissatisfaction-, as a significant aspect of the relationship between language learning and attitude toward the foreign culture -*the concept of anomie* (Brown 2002). Anomie might be described as the first symptom of the stage of acculturation. A feeling of "homesickness", where one feels neither bound firmly to one's native culture nor fully adapted to the second culture. It is unavoidable since becoming bilingual or multilingual means becoming bicultural or multicultural to some extent. The development of instructional activity must consider this issue by being sensitive to this cultural state and establishing the bridge across them otherwise it will obstruct the further language learning process. He believes that the language mastery might not effectively occur before the acculturation stage or even more likely, that learners might never be successful in their mastery of the language.

In assisting the students whose feelings neither bound firmly to their native culture nor fully adapted to the second culture (the culture of their classmates, the culture of the teacher, and the culture of the textbook and teaching material), the teacher should attempt to bridge the gap by supporting them to establish their "**third place**" in which they position themselves between their first culture (C1) and the second culture (C2) (Kramsch, 1993). This "third place" involves

the learners in an objective and subjective reflection of C1 and C2 from which they must choose their own meanings that best reflect their personal perspectives. The students are encouraged to reflect on comparisons between cultures and form their own perspective on them. Hence, this conception of culture emphasizes the importance of individual interpretations of culture rather than rigid stereotypical notions.

This establishment of the third place should be supported by some systematic activities, otherwise, the goal of reflective activity will not be achieved. Here are adapted ideas (adapted from Kramch, 1993) of the ways in which the teacher can assist their students in conducting their reflective activity. First, the teacher can establish a sphere of inter-culturality, one in which the learners are encouraged to relate C1 and C2 and reflect on perceptions of them. The more reflective activity they have, the clearer relationship between different cultures they will find. Second, the focus of the teaching culture should be on the interpersonal process where instructional activities should go beyond the presentation of cultural facts and move towards a process of understanding what seems to be the "foreignness" of other cultures (macro-features such as specific cultural values and attitudes). The differences should be deliberately made visible to the students. By finding the differences they are able to understand their own culture better and see how different cultures interact one another what are its unique and distinct characteristics. By increasing students' awareness of culture differences, their appreciation and respect for cultural differences can be developed.

Third, the cultural differences should not be viewed as only national traits. Many other aspects of culture such as age, race, gender, social class should be taken into account. The teacher can exploit some of the interesting or problematic pattern of classroom interaction and relationship as the source of discussion. This, however, demands an intercultural knowledge, skills and awareness of the teacher. Fourth, the teacher should cross the disciplinary boundaries, - understanding culture by encompassing other subjects as sociology, ethnography and socio-linguistics. The explication of the differences between cultures for eg. the ways in which a particular culture operates the ways in which it produces its values and concepts may help students see the diversity within a culture. This may prevent the formation of stereotypes. To do so, teachers should facilitate themselves with such cultural knowledge and understanding including the

external and internal forces which contribute to the existence of particular cultural frame, concept, value and practices. Surely, their background as English language teacher is not an adequate resources and key to the access of cultural knowledge for this purposes.

If this process of acquiring culture and language is successful, learners would be able to use English in such a way to communicate effectively and appropriately and also in a way that reflects their own local cultures and personal beliefs (Kramsch & Sullivan 1996 cited in Baker 2003).

Implications

Some implications are raised in repositioning culture based on the discussed items above.

- Training and re-training teachers in the area of cultural literacy and cultural consciousness-raising should be conducted periodically. Fantini (1995) extends the line of this argument when he proposed an expansion of goal of language education for developing intercultural communicative competence. It is expected that they will be well-equipped with cultural literacy for it will enable them in dealing with culture and culture reflection and managing diversity well. They should expand their horizon by facilitating themselves with common cultural issues, especially those which are in the learners' immediate cultural context. Unless the teachers have sufficient awareness, knowledge, and skills to manage students' various culture appropriately, they are going to face trouble in the classroom.
- Cultural issues are not the only topic to be introduced and discussed but a way of teaching. The teachers cannot develop and enhance cultural awareness in a way that act against cultural equality. Teachers are the models for their students either in social, cultural, affective or cognitive setting. The students will pick up verbal and non-verbal cultural cues and collaborate them into their cultural belief system.
- Recognizing and accepting cultural diversity among students is obligatory. Teachers must be war of indoctrinating the learners culturally, requiring them to accept the teachers' cultural belief and values unquestioningly
- Teachers should select and choose the textbook and teaching materials wisely. They should set up some criteria about what culture sensitive teaching

materials should look like. Textbook and teaching material is the sourcebook and material not course book and material. The teachers can use supplementary materials which present various ethnic contexts.

- Pair work and group work among culturally mixed students should be encouraged. The more they are exposed to different cultures, the greater the likelihood of them acquiring intercultural sensitivity
- Teachers should actively break cultural stereotypes and negative attitude towards particular cultural group. They can aid learners in dispelling stereotypes about other culture, replacing these stereotypes with more open and accurate understanding of the other cultures.
- Students are no longer the passive recipients of their teacher expertise. They are the actors in the class who have their own cultural values and belief systems. The teacher can ask students to bring their own cultural knowledge from their immediate surroundings into the ELT classroom and this will boost their cultural sensitivity.

Conclusion

The second and/or foreign language learning and teaching could benefit from the appropriate management and exploitation of cultural issues. Culture is an inevitable aspect of language. The existence of “foreign culture” in the EFL/ESL classroom cannot be avoided. Internally, each of the teaching and learning component—teacher, students and their classmates, teaching materials, textbook) brings with them their own cultural mores and systems. Externally, the enormous spread of English along with its culture hegemony calls for national sentiment which may lead to either teacher’s or students’ cultural defense. The ESL/EFL classroom could benefit from the appropriate management and exploitation of cultural issues leading to cultural sustainability of local languages and cultures and an openness toward other cultures. Further, if cultural diversity is managed well, it will contribute significantly to the development of intercultural competence.

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