

# UC Berkeley

## The CATESOL Journal

### Title

What Is the Role of Teaching Culture in Content-Based Instruction?

### Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/92f4x3t4>

### Journal

The CATESOL Journal, 5(1)

### ISSN

1535-0517

### Authors

Hilles, Sharon

Lynch, Dennis

### Publication Date

1992

### DOI

10.5070/B5.36613

### Copyright Information

This work is made available under the terms of a Creative Commons Attribution License, available at

<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>

Peer reviewed

## What Is the Role of Teaching Culture in Content-Based Instruction?

**SHARON HILLES**

*California State Polytechnic University, Pomona*

**DENNIS LYNCH**

*University of California, Los Angeles*

Culture lessons in most ESL classrooms, from preschool through college or adult level are, in principle, pretty much the same. We share and celebrate the holidays, food, and music of our students' various native cultures. We also give brief lessons on American holidays as they come up: a unit on the pilgrims in November, some Christmas carols (and possibly a chorus of "Dreydl, Dreydl, Dreydl") in December, and valentines in February. All of this is done because most of us are committed to the notion that "language cannot be taught apart from culture" and that "to learn a language is to learn a culture." However, most of us would be hard pressed to actually explain let alone defend either statement.

This notion of *culture* which is often reflected in classroom lessons is undoubtedly interesting and helpful to newcomers. Because of it we help orient students with procedural information and probably make them feel more comfortable in an alien culture because we acknowledge their own. We would like to argue, however, that this aspect of culture needs less attention than it currently enjoys because it is not particularly problematic. Holidays and music may be the focus of curiosity and interest, but they seldom become the source of misunderstanding, at least of the sort that can systematically distort the dynamics of a classroom. There is, however, another aspect of culture—another level, if you will—which is very problematic and potentially quite disruptive to the multicultural classroom. This aspect of culture is less visible, and, as a result, less intelligible to teacher and student alike. Following the work of early 20th-century phenomenologists and of more recent sociologists and sociolinguists such as Goffman (1959, 1963), Garfinkel (1967), and Ochs (1988), we would like to invite ESL teachers to rethink their definitions of culture in light of the evidence that culture is a far more powerful and potentially disruptive force than most of us imagine. Moreover,

we would like to argue that culture, in this sense, deserves consideration as content in any discussion of content-based instruction.

The aspect of culture which interests us most is not obvious differences in food, music, and dress, but rather the mundane, the ordinary, the everyday stuff of which reality, especially social reality, is made. It is that which "everyone knows" or which is common sense. It is never (or rarely) up for question, but it differs, sometimes dramatically, from one cultural group to another. It is part of the background of our lives, the setting, the given. This aspect of culture is very much like a pair of contact lenses. That is, we look through it, we experience reality in terms of it, but we do not see it, except under the most unusual conditions. This transparent aspect of culture, however, is vitally important because it is the shared understanding inherent in our daily practices that determines how we slice up, organize, experience and (perhaps) constitute reality. It determines what we experience in life. As a result, people from various cultures may experience the same situation in markedly different ways depending on how, when, and by whom they have been enculturated.

That people experience or constitute reality in different ways and that they cannot see the lenses through which they look is not in and of itself particularly alarming or problematic for the multicultural classroom. However, according to Garfinkel (1967) there is more to this aspect of culture than its near invisibility, and we think this is very important: There is evidence that this aspect or level of culture also has a moral status. That is, cultural breaches are treated as if they were moral breaches. Our reactions to such cultural breaches are the same as they might be to someone who lies to us—but when someone lies, we know what is wrong. When someone breaches a cultural expectation of the sort we are talking about, however, we do not see what is being breached (because it is transparent to our daily activity), yet we may feel outraged—often in staggering disproportion to the gravity of the transgression committed.

A good example of this might be the case of a student "cheating" on an exam. In some cultures, cheating is viewed positively, as a sign that one is willing to share and is not so arrogant as to refuse help from others. Students who grow up in societies with such an interpretation are faced with generations of cheating in which their teachers, and their teachers' teachers before them assisted each other on exams, often in clever and ingenious ways. Now imagine these same students at an American university. When they put these same deeply ingrained strategies to work in a new environment, their professors react quite differently. Even when teachers know that such behavior is acceptable in the students' native country, they still react emotionally. Often the response involves moral justification: "People just shouldn't do that! It isn't right!"

Plagiarism is another example of a potential cultural misunderstanding. In some countries, using the words of others is consi-

dered good scholarship, a way to demonstrate that one knows the words of authorities (Gadda, 1991). In American schools, though, such an act flies in the face of our own deeply embedded understanding of what constitutes acceptable scholarly behavior. When students plagiarize, teachers feel personally insulted and betrayed.

These two examples involve acts that, from a western point of view, are unambiguously immoral. For this reason they can be misleading because the level of culture to which we hope to draw attention is really much broader than issues such as plagiarism and cheating. It involves those acts which may be unconsciously construed as immoral, even though the standards by which the interpretations are made are not visible to the interpreters. These cultural differences might include how close or far to stand from those with whom one is speaking, what is bad breath or offensive body odor, what is the proper way to look at the person with whom one is talking (such as the situation in which a student stares blankly at the teacher even though he or she understands), or what counts as an interruption or rude behavior during class (such as sharpening a pencil during a teacher-directed portion of the lesson or asking fellow students for confirmation of teacher instructions which have just been given orally and written on the board). The problem is that not only do these cultural differences disrupt the teacher-student relationship *per se*, (for affective factors are unarguably important) but they distort the discursive dynamics of a classroom, that is, all the factors that go with language and how it is used. Teachers and students, from elementary school through university level, can find themselves exasperated, frustrated, and offended but unable to say exactly why, and therefore unable to remedy the situation.

Let us now return to the focus of this volume: content-based instruction. As is well known, the basic premise of content-based instruction for second language learners is that students will learn the target language better and more efficiently if they are taught not the language directly but other subjects in the language. We would like to argue that culture, particularly its moral status and its invisibility, is a critical topic which should be addressed in content-based teaching.

Following the *into-through-and-beyond model* (see, for example, Brinton, Goodwin, & Ranks, 1991) a content-based unit on culture for any level might begin with the obvious, extreme differences in food, dress, language, and custom and then move to the aspect of culture that isn't so obvious but much more problematic.

### Elementary School

For elementary school children, a good beginning into-activity might be bringing in pictures from *National Geographic*, *The Smithsonian*, or any other source that has attractive color photos of people from other cultures. As a prereading activity, students could discuss

different cultural customs that they see in the pictures and their reactions to them. Follow-up questions could include what language the people in the pictures might speak and whether the students have had any experience with languages other than the ones represented in the classroom.<sup>1</sup> The through-phase of the cultural lesson could be centered around any number of children's multicultural texts such as *I Hate English!* (1989) by Ellen Levine or student-generated and illustrated language experience texts about customs, holidays, food, and language from students' native countries.

Finally, the beyond-activity could exploit a natural ability of children this age. Elementary students can (and spontaneously do) imagine "other places" where "up is down and people think differently, and there are no doors on houses and where every home has 17 television sets because the sets usually break, but there are no repairmen."<sup>2</sup> This kind of play helps students to think about the possibility and acceptability of other points of view. Students can imagine other worlds, write descriptions of them, and draw pictures of them. They can share their creations with the class. They can assume the role of someone from the imaginary place they have created, make costumes, and answer questions in character from the teacher and class about their "home." Other students can play the parts of reporters and interview the aliens. The teacher can set the tone and pace of the interviews if necessary, move from descriptive kinds of questions to more subjective questions about feelings, ask about classroom rules, procedures, and tasks: "Do children go to school in your world? If not, how do they learn? If they do go to school, what is it like? Is it very different from here? Does this classroom seem strange to you? Why? Do you have brothers and sisters? How old are they? Do you miss your friends? What are their names? What do they like to do? Do you think they would like it here? Do you like it here? Why or why not?" The final task might include a written summary of the interview and possibly even a class newspaper with interviews and news from other worlds. The idea is that young thinkers get used to the idea that there are deep cultural differences and that these differences seem perfectly normal and commonplace (invisible) for someone who is a part of that group.

### High School Students

A very evocative and exciting series of cultural lessons for older students could be organized around an adaptation of *Ways With Words* (1983) or the article "What No Bed Time Story Means" (1986). In these studies, Stanford anthropologist Shirley Brice Heath describes three cultures within the United States with respect to language socialization and literacy and the extent to which this socialization matches the expectations held by schools. An excellent high school into-activity for this text can be based on an excerpt from Clyde

Gluckhohn's (1949) "Mirror for Man", in which the author defines what anthropologists mean by culture and explains culture's influence on how people think, feel, and behave.

The activity starts out with pictures from *National Geographic* (as described above) and then moves to group clustering activities. The first task is to brainstorm on the function of culture and cluster the ideas elicited on the blackboard. The ensuing discussion is eventually led to the significance of items mentioned by more than one group. The class is divided into groups again to repeat the clustering activity, this time using information about a culture which is assigned to them. Following the group clustering activity, groups present their cluster to the class, which decides on the accuracy of information, the existence of stereotypes, and the overlaps between cultures. Class discussion also centers on which characteristics are important or superficial. The final step in this stage is to lead the class to a consensus regarding the benefits of understanding another culture and what potential problems might exist between cultures. Teachers should encourage students to explore how culture can be used to define an individual and if there are any dangers in allowing a culture to speak for an individual.

To help students work through the Kluckhohn reading, they are divided into jigsaw groups, each of which is then assigned a portion of the reading. Group members become experts on their portion of the text. The groups are then reconfigured, with one expert in each group. In these reconfigured groups students construct a complete definition of culture, drawing on the specialized knowledge of each of the experts in their group. This activity can be followed up with other through-activities, including T-graph exercises in which specific examples are taken from the text (e.g., "Chinese dislike milk and milk products") and written in the left-hand portion of the diagram; the generalizations which these examples illustrate (e.g., "Likes and dislikes for food are learned cultural behavior") are written in the right-hand portion of the diagram. A beyond-activity in this unit might be an adaptation of one of UCLA sociologist Harold Garfinkel's exercises. Students can assume the role of a stranger—or even of an alien. In this role they observe and record the everyday academic and social behaviors of their multicultural peers (including native English-speakers) and the reactions of others. Finally they can compare what they see with their own background behaviors. They can keep journals, produce a group report or paper, or put on a television show in which their subjects are interviewed or observed in their natural settings.

### University Students

Older students might benefit from a more direct approach. The well-known sociologist, Erving Goffman (1959, 1963) explored some of those aspects of culture that are invisible to us by studying settings

in which cultural norms did not apply, such as mental institutions. Garfinkel sent out students to purposely breach cultural agreements to illustrate various aspects of culture, including its invisibility and moral status. Lessons organized around portions of these readings and sources cited therein could be a rich source of cultural insight for older students. Like their younger counterparts, they could become investigators themselves in a beyond-activity, observing and describing the multicultural environment of their own classrooms, schools, and neighborhoods. At this level, students could even participate in adaptations of some of Garfinkel's breaching exercises as a way of making what is normally invisible, visible. Students could make a point of standing closer (or further away) than feels acceptable while talking with other students, teachers, parents, and so forth. Afterwards they should explain the experiment to their subjects and note their own responses to the experiment and the reactions of their interlocutors to both the experiment and its explanation. Such observations can be very revealing to those who have not previously thought about the hidden influences of social and linguistic practices. Variations would include having students speak too loudly or too softly, interrupt or avoid responding appropriately, digress or give only short, direct responses, begin each statement with a brief narrative that winds slowly into the main point, and so forth. Writing up these exercises and follow-up discussions regarding how students felt during the experiments as well as open discussion about cheating, interrupting instructors, or people who stand too close (and what *too close* means) would contribute to the students' developing understanding of how cultural differences can distort speech situations, especially between teacher and student. Needless to say, these activities also provide an engaging occasion for the practice of language. (See also Devenney, 1991 for a description of an *observe-and-record approach* used in conjunction with a language class.)

There is, of course, more to be said about the kind of course being proposed here. The main point is to demonstrate that many aspects of culture are invisible to its practitioners, and that breaches of this aspect of culture pack a wallop. Learning these two simple points would empower both students and teachers. Breaches of the sort we have described were relatively unusual in American schools some years ago because they simply didn't arise. Most teachers and students were from the same background: mainstream, middle class.<sup>3</sup> This is no longer the case, and we feel that a knowledge of culture, what it is, and how it is reflected in our own group and in the various groups of our students is essential if we are to truly promote rather than merely tolerate diversity. ■

## Footnotes

1. We are grateful to Donna Brinton and the members of the 1989 Teaching Analytical Reading and Writing Program for sharing this and several of the other teaching ideas mentioned in this article.

2. This is part of an actual story recently told to us by a 7-year-old.

3. As Heath (1986) points out, "Terms such as *mainstream* and *middle-class* are frequently used in both popular and scholarly writings without careful definition. In general, the literature characterizes this group as school-oriented, aspiring toward upward mobility through formal institutions, and providing enculturation that positively values routines of promptness, linearity (in habits ranging from furniture arrangement to entrance into a movie theater), and evaluative and judgmental responses to behaviors that deviate from their norms..." (p. 123).

## References

- Brinton, D., Goodwin, J., & Ranks, L. (1991). Helping language minority students read and write analytically: The journey into, through, and beyond. In F. Peitzman & G. Gadda (Eds.), *With different eyes: Insights into teaching language minority students across the disciplines* (pp. 75-110). Los Angeles: California Academic Partnership Program.
- Devenney, R. (1991). Teaching culture in language classes: One approach. *The CATESOL Journal*, 4, 83-90.
- Gadda, G. (1991). Writing and language socialization across cultures: Some implications for the classroom. In F. Peitzman & G. Gadda (Eds.), *With different eyes: Insights into teaching language minority students across the disciplines* (pp. 55-74). Los Angeles: California Academic Partnership Program.
- Garfinkel, H. (1967). *Studies in ethnomethodology*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall.
- Goffman, E. (1959). *Behavior in public places*. New York: Free Press.
- Goffman, E. (1963). *Behavior in public places*. New York: Free Press.
- Heath, S. B. (1983). *Ways with words*. Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press.
- Heath, S. B. (1986). What no bedtime story means: Narrative skills at home and school. In B. Schieffelin & E. Ochs (Eds.), *Language socialization across cultures* (pp. 97-124). Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press.

Kluckhohn, C. (1949). Mirror for man. Reprinted in Jo Ray McCuen & Anthony C. Winkler, *Readings for Writers* (4th ed.) (pp. 226-233). New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich.

Levine, E. (1989). *I hate English!*. New York: Scholastic.

Ochs, E. (1988). *Culture and language development*. Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press.