



CAPE Alumni Internet Connection: English Teacher Talk

CAPE Internet Talk was started as part of CAPE follow-up activities to continue ties with CAPE alumni and those who are interested in professional development in English teaching. It is hoped that this would increase our bond and aloha among former participants, and that the information in the TALK would help our alumni and friends/members review what they know and deepen their understanding of issues and interest in the ESL field.

Cultural Content in Language Classrooms

Sandra Lee McKay

San Francisco State University

Culture plays an important role in teaching materials. Cortazzi and Jin (1999) distinguish two types of cultural information that can be used in language textbooks and materials: *target culture materials* that use the culture of a country where English is spoken as a first language; and *source culture materials* that draw on the learners' own culture as content.

How does the use of these types of cultural information relate to the teaching of English? As with all language teaching materials, what to include as content depends on the background and goals of the students and teacher. Let us then examine how the choice of cultural content is affected by the contexts where English is taught.

Target Culture Materials

Today with the tremendous interest in learning English, one very common classroom context is when the teacher and students come from the same cultural background, but the materials used in the classroom draw heavily on the target culture. This would be the case as, for example, in a classroom in Thailand with a Thai teacher using materials written in the United States or Great Britain. What are some advantages and disadvantages of such an approach to teaching culture? On the plus side it may be that some students in the class, perhaps due to the popularity of western films and music, may be interested in learning more about English-speaking cultures. Or it may be that some of the students are preparing to visit or study in English-speaking countries.

On the other hand, it may be that some of the materials are largely irrelevant or uninteresting to some of the students or present cultural conflicts for the students. For example, one of my graduate students told me about his experience using a U.S. published book with his class in Korea. In one exercise in the book, students were asked to look at photographs of various American scenes depicting different periods of history and decide in which decade the picture was taken. As one might imagine, students found the task extremely difficult. Furthermore, he as teacher had few resources to draw on to help his students. The presentation of such materials may place teachers from the source culture in a troubling position since when their students ask about the unfamiliar cultural information in the text, they may not have the answers. This could be especially problematic in many Asian cultures where the teacher is considered to be the provider of information.

A second situation that can arise in using target culture materials is when the students are from the source culture and the teacher is from the target culture, as might happen with an American teacher working in China. Obviously many of the advantages and disadvantages mentioned above would apply. However, in this situation, if the teacher were from the target culture dealt with in the text, he or she could explain unknown cultural information. However, this may result in the teacher talking more about his/her culture than the students using English to tell others about their culture. In such a case there can be a great deal of teacher talk rather than student talk as teachers tell students about their culture.

Source Culture Materials

Textbook materials can also use the source culture as cultural content. For example, one Japanese English textbook approved by the Ministry of Education asks students to describe annual Japanese events like the Children's Day Festival and the Moon-Viewing Festival and traditional arts like Haiku, Noh comedy, and Bunraku puppet shows. These materials could be used with either a Japanese English teacher or an expatriate teacher. What are the implications of such an approach to culture teaching?

It is possible that since the students are already familiar with such topics, they are not motivating to the students. It may be, however, that students are not well informed about aspects of their own culture and hence, the text provides them with the opportunity to learn more about these topics. Or if students are familiar with these topics, they may not have the English vocabulary to discuss these topics. Furthermore if one purpose of an international language like English is to explain one's own culture to another, then a source culture focus in materials helps students acquire the English needed to do this. Finally, in situations when the teachers are from the source culture they will likely have the background knowledge to provide students with additional information or at least have access to such information.

It is also possible that source culture texts could be used in contexts where the students come from this culture but the teacher is from another culture. In such a situation, the teacher, if not familiar with some of the cultural topics, can become an interested listener, creating a real context for students to tell others about their culture in English. This would seem to be an ideal context for using English as an international language. What is surprising is that in many non-English speaking countries where I have worked, teachers and administrators prefer to use a target rather than source culture in their English textbooks. This perhaps is due to the belief that language and culture are inseparable and that English by definition still belongs to the countries where English is spoken as a native language.

References

- Cortazzi, M. & L. Jin (1999). Cultural mirrors: Materials and methods in the EFL classroom. In E. Hinkel (Ed.), *Culture in second language teaching* (pp. 196-219). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

*Contributor: Dr. Sandra McKay, Professor of English, San Francisco State University
Jai-Ho Yoo, CAPE President*