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Using American Culture as a Context for English Language Learning

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Abstract

While most English as a Second Language (ESL) instructors would agree that culture and language are inseparably entwined, the cultural topics provided in ESL textbooks are often insufficient to provide ESL students with the cultural knowledge needed to succeed at the university level. This paper discusses how carefully chosen cultural topics can be used as “content” in the ESL classroom for content-based instruction. This paper also provides examples of units that can be included in an American culture class and explains how teaching American culture can be used to build rapport among students and instructors, and provide students with an intrinsic motivation for learning.

Language is the blood of the soul into which thoughts run and out of which they grow.
—Oliver Wendell Holmes

Throughout our experience as language learners living abroad, we quickly learned that learning a language requires more than memorizing grammar rules, vocabulary, and pronunciation. Culture informs language and language informs culture. Although explicit teaching of culture may not occur in all English as a Second Language (ESL) classrooms, we argue that using culture as the context to teach ESL is essential for students in acquiring the English language, and we propose some methods for teaching culture in the ESL classroom. The reasons for the lack of explicit teaching of American culture are varied: the fleeting nature of cultural components, particularly pop culture, can make instruction difficult, or there may not be a specific culture learning objective in skill-based ESL classes. Lastly, according to Rucynski (2011), teachers often struggle with what type of cultural component to include in their lessons. Should they focus “on daily living tips like etiquette, and other cultural differences or on pop culture” (p. 8)?

Before entering into a discussion about the teaching of American culture to English language learners (ELLs), it is important to define the very concept of culture. Dictionary.com (n.d.) defines culture as “the behaviors and beliefs characteristic of a particular social, ethnic, or age group.” While there is nothing wrong with this definition, it seems rather broad. Language teaching specific literature offers a different definition of culture. Warikoo and Carter (2009) define culture as “shared values, traditions, language, ethnic consciousness, and social experiences” (p. 368). Others define culture as something that exists within social contexts and is shared by all actors (Gans, 1979; Goodenough, as cited in Warikoo & Carter, 2009; Lamont & Molnar, 2002; Williams, 1976). In addition, Ajayi (2010) says that culture is not static, rather it is something that
constantly evolves and changes as people interact in social contexts. For our purposes, we will define culture as shared values that exist within specific social contexts, with the understanding that culture is not one entity; rather, it is fluid and evolutionary. This paper specifically focuses on American culture; that is, those shared values that are uniquely “American.” In evaluating the merit of a cultural topic, Rucynski (2011) suggests answering these two questions: 1) “Will the content help students to understand more about the target culture?” and 2) “Will the content help students to be able to communicate with people from the target culture?” (p. 9) These two questions are at the crux of determining what cultural aspects to teach ELLs.

A review of ESL textbooks leads to some conclusions regarding the teaching of American culture. Skill-based textbooks may make some attempt to incorporate American culture into a lesson; however, this is often used merely as a model for teaching a specific English skill, not to teach students the content itself. Furthermore, the cultural aspect in skill-based textbooks is often decontextualized. For example, a textbook may present a reading about the first Thanksgiving to demonstrate the use of the past tense, but the cultural significance, history, and traditions of Thanksgiving are not discussed, leaving students with gaps in their cultural knowledge. Finding appropriate American culture-based textbooks also presents some difficulty. Due to the difficulty and expense of obtaining the rights to popular movies and music, it is often difficult to find a mass produced textbook that addresses these topics. In addition, because pop culture changes so rapidly and there is a plethora of content available online, there has also been a move away from pop culture-based textbook development. Looking at recently published ESL textbooks used at the university level demonstrates that there is a trend towards using academic topics as the context for modeling the target language, rather than using cultural topics (Brooks, 2011; Hilles & Houck, 2008). Although students at the university level should be learning academic language, they could learn it through a content that is more meaningful. In addition, although content based on academic units such as sociology or biological science may be useful for some students, it may not be universally applicable to students studying, for example, art and design or construction management. While there has been a movement away from the pop culture approach to teaching culture, examining current corpora for American culture concepts likely to be discussed in a variety of academic fields could target materials applicable to a majority of students that could be used on an ongoing basis.

In light of the discussion regarding what culture is and the current state of teaching American culture in the classroom, the next logical question is: Why? Why should we teach American culture in the classroom? Opponents argue that culture does not have a place in the university-level or adult English classroom. The ideas behind this view are that class time is limited, and students need to learn the English skills that they need, not cultural references. In addition, teachers and administrators against explicitly teaching culture argue that students will acquire cultural knowledge on their own by living in the US. However, we argue that explicitly teaching culture and using culture as the context in skill-based or integrated skill courses enhances students’ learning of English and provides them with essential cultural knowledge that will help them to navigate academic life more fluently.

First, ESL teachers should teach culture in the ESL classroom today because language and culture are irrevocably intertwined. The foundations of the Teaching
English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL) field reinforce the idea that language cannot be separated from culture. The Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, also known as the linguistic relativity principle, is the idea that differences in the way languages encode cultural and cognitive categories affect the way people think, so that speakers of different languages will tend to think and behave differently depending on the language they use (Kay & Kempton, 1984). The Sapir-Whorf hypothesis is still instrumental in second language acquisition theory, even today, as it is taught to current TESOL graduate students. Another theorist who contributed to the idea of the interconnectedness of language and culture is Lee Vygotsky. Vygotsky’s theory, summarized by John-Steiner and Mahn (1996), is that in developmental psychology, children’s cultural interactions inform language learning, and vice versa. This demonstrates that in the field of psychology, language and culture are seen as informing one another and cannot be separated in the brain. Therefore, ESL teachers should not attempt to separate language and culture in order to fully utilize the brain’s capacity for second language acquisition.

Recently, Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL) included teaching culture as a goal of the field in Adult ESL Language and Literacy Instruction: A Vision and Action Agenda for the 21st Century (2001). One of the suggested action items Action 1 states that teachers should:

Align curricula with learners’ goals and needs and include instruction in the following, as appropriate: language, culture, preparation for citizenship and civic participation, family education (including involvement with children and children’s schools), workforce preparedness (movement into the workforce, through a number of work skill levels, and to advanced job placement), academic content, life skills, and immigrant rights (TESOL, 2001). This action item from TESOL lends pedagogical support to teaching culture when teaching ESL as an important goal of the profession.

American culture instruction provides a context for language learning. According to Regent (1985), reading comprehension is heavily dependent on the reader’s knowledge of the world and prior experience, including cultural background. Students reading across cultures may be applying inappropriate schemata, resulting in a comprehension breakdown, particularly at the macro level (Pugh, 1989). While American culture provides a context for language learning, it is also important to teach pragmatics. According to Tan and Farashaiyan (2012), pragmatic competence is recognized as the ability of learners to make use of a variety of linguistic formula appropriately when communicating in a context that is socially and culturally specific. For example, Americans have culturally acceptable ways of making requests. Tan and Farashaiyan (2012) argue that this skill is particularly important to teach to ELLs because most L2 interactions take place in the form of requests.

We also see that learning culture alongside language provides essential motivation for language learning. Gardner’s studies on motivation provide a definition of integrative motivation, which is that students’ desire to fit in with the target culture affects their motivation to learn the language (Norris-Holt, 2001). Norris-Holt (2001) points out that students’ level of integrative motivation can have a significant effect on their language learning specifically. The take-away for ESL teachers is that tapping into students’ integrative motivation by using American culture as the primary context for language learning can support and enhance their ability to acquire English language fluency.
The teaching of American culture is appropriate in both adult education and the university. For students in adult education, particularly those with children in school, American culture instruction is necessary in order to help them navigate cultural issues their children may face in school, such as holidays. In addition, many schools rely on the concept of volunteerism, which parents may be unfamiliar with. Instruction in these matters will help parents integrate with other parents and integrate their children into the school system. For adults without school-aged children, American culture instruction can also help them in the workplace, building social relationships with coworkers.

The teaching of American culture has multiple applications in the university environment. In order to find American culture references in the university classroom, we searched the Michigan Corpus of Academic Spoken English (MICASE) (Simpson, Briggs, Ovens, & Swales, 2002), a database of lecture transcripts from the University of Michigan. In order to disprove the argument that culture was not discussed outside of the humanities, the search was limited to native speakers in the areas of “Biological and Health Sciences” (Intro Biology Discussion Section, 1999) and “Physical Science and Engineering” (Intro Programming Lecture, 2000). Within these two lectures, both approximately an hour in length, there were multiple references to American culture, such as the New York Times, Home Depot, Berkley, and a reference to stacking fruit in a pyramid with the explanation “it’s often called the cannonball arrangement because it’s what you see at war memorials” (Intro Programming Lecture, 2000). In addition to cultural references, behaviors that may be confusing to those outside of American culture, such as humor in the lecture and an informal environment where students are allowed to interrupt the lecturer to ask questions, were also apparent.

Outside of the classroom, international students also experienced shock regarding another academic environment: the discussion board. Tan, Nabb, Aagard, & Kim (2010) studied Chinese students’ reactions to online conversations, with specific regard to cultural differences. Students felt “shock” over the way American students incorporated their personal experiences, feelings, and opinions into the online discussion. The Chinese students believed that class time should be reserved for academic discussion. One participant expressed his opinion as such:

It was absolutely a cultural shock when I expanded everybody's postings to read and found that many times they were chatting about their personal travels and hobbies, which, in my eyes, had no relation with the academic content we were discussing. That wasted my time. (as cited in Tan, et al., 2010, p. 12)

The cultural differences here lie in the fact that in American academic environments, opinions are not only valued but, at many times, required. Lastly, slang is another aspect of American culture. Homuth and Piippo (2012) found that slang words and expressions are used in both work and academic life, and that being able to understand and use slang has an impact on an ELL’s ability to communicate socioculturally. If we continue with the idea that language and culture are intertwined, we can say that students who cannot navigate formal and informal registers in the appropriate cultural settings run a risk of behaving inappropriately in certain situations, leading to a potential reduction in learning English due to a lack of confidence, embarrassment, and feeling left out or feeling like they do not belong.
There are two ways that we suggest instructors can incorporate a cultural element in the ESL classroom. One is by using pop culture as a context for cultural and language learning. Rucynski (2011) explains how media/pop culture phenomena can be used to teach American culture. He used *The Simpsons* to teach American culture to Japanese students in Japan. Of course, the author discusses the need to provide scaffolding and clear instruction before introducing the clips, and he also points out that the focus should not necessarily be on the humor, but on the content. In another example of using pop culture to teach ESL students, Arizona State University’s American English and Culture Program includes a component called “Reading Theater,” where students read a novel or reader and then watch the movie that was based on the book (Chang, 2011). Using pop culture as a starting point for discussion of cultural values is one way to model the target language in an authentic way, but also to teach students cultural knowledge that will enhance their language learning and make the information real and interesting to them.

Another way to incorporate cultural aspects into an ESL course is to send students out into the culture. Being in the United States, ESL students have ample opportunity to observe American culture in action. For example, Arizona State University’s American English and Culture Program also combines an academic English program with cultural components such as conversation partners with Americans, field trips to sporting events, and guest speakers on cultural topics (Chang, 2011). This is similar to what we have done and continue to expand through the American culture courses at Eastern Michigan University (see the appendix for syllabus and course objectives). Sending the students out into the community to interact with Americans is another way to provide a rich and rewarding learning experience that enhances their language skills.

Preparation for the cultural excursions mentioned in the appendix can take place in a variety of ways. For example, while many of our students are familiar with “football” (soccer) in their country, the concept of American football is foreign to many. In order to prepare students for an excursion to an American football game, students could begin by brainstorming a list of typical sights at a sporting event in their country. The teacher could then present the rules of American football, perhaps even showing some video clips of plays or terminology in action. Students could then compare sporting events in their countries and the United States prior to attending a game. After a brief introduction to the sport, the class could attend a sporting event together on a college campus. After the game, the students could return to their lists of observations at sporting events in their countries and make comparisons between American sports and sports in their countries. This lesson not only activates prior knowledge from students about sporting events, but it also helps them to make connections between old and new material and, therefore, increase recall about American sporting events.

Similar preparation can take place for other cultural units mentioned on the syllabus in the appendix. When discussing the American classroom, students can role play office visits to a professor, or practice making phone calls using their phones in class to obtain information from a professor or a department on campus. In addition, the ESL instructor might send students on a campus “scavenger hunt,” whether in person or virtually, to find out information about events or services on campus. Holiday-themed units provide an excellent opportunity to bring realia into the classroom, as well as to discuss and explain what students may be observing in their daily lives around the holidays.
Explicit cultural instruction allows students to break down the barriers in language learning. If students want to continue studying or working in the United States once their formal study of the language is complete, they will have to have an understanding of American culture in order to fully participate as an integrated member of the community. In addition, explicitly teaching culture alongside language increases students’ motivation and interest, and gives them a platform for faster and more effective language acquisition. American culture is not one more thing to teach; rather, culture can be the content for teaching everything.

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Appendix
Syllabus and Schedule for ESLN 117 at Eastern Michigan University

ESLN 117: American Language & Culture I
Eastern Michigan University
Fall 2012

Instructor: Ms. Allie Piippo  E-mail: apiippo@emich.edu
Class Time/Day: 1:00-3:40pm Friday  Office: 200 Alexander
Room: Pray Harrold 218  Mailbox: 219 Alexander “Piippo”
Office Hours: MW 2:00-3:15pm, Thursday 3:30-5:00pm, or by appointment

Course Description: This course introduces students to broad themes in American Culture and targeted issues related to the academic culture of American universities. The course uses reading, media, and external oral assignments to provide international students with knowledge, skills, and cultural capital needed to understand America and to succeed in the university.

Course Objectives
This course will:
1. provide students with cultural knowledge widely known by their American peers.
2. develop in students a sense of place within the EMU community.
3. provide students opportunities to practice and learn English in a variety of cultural settings.
4. expand students’ vocabulary within the 5,000 most common words needed for conversational fluency
5. provide students with the skills to research aspects of American culture and/or American values through a variety of investigation methods (surveys, etc.)
6. build idiomatic language fluency
7. identify types of language used in humor (irony, sarcasm, etc.)

Required Materials:
• All About the USA 1: A Cultural Reader (second edition) by Milada Broukal.
• The Eastern Echo

Required out-of-class assignments:
1. Students must attend four sporting or cultural events on campus and bring a program or ticket to class as proof of attendance. 1 event MUST be an EMU football game. Students must write a brief summary of the event (a 5-10 sentence paragraph).
2. Students must watch an American TV show outside of class and answer summary and reflection questions every week. We will discuss the show in class together.

**Scoring:**

- Vocabulary Journal: 10%
- T.V. show summaries & reflections: 10%
- Cultural knowledge quizzes (vocabulary, grammar, & facts): 30%
- EMU activity attendance reports (4): 20%
- Final Project: 30%

**Tentative Schedule**

**ESLN 117 Fall 2012**

**Week 1**  
Fri 9/7  
Course Introduction; Initial assessment; American Culture Overview

**Week 2**  
Fri 9/14  
American Football Introduction: Vocabulary and Rules  
Vocabulary: Making a vocabulary journal, state names, football terms

**Week 3**  
Fri 9/21  
Textbook Part 1 (continued)  
American Football: Idioms and Culture  
Vocabulary: State products, football idioms

**Week 4**  
Fri 9/28  
Adjusting to the American Classroom: office hours/talking to your professor; appropriate & inappropriate in-class behavior; plagiarism & cheating; study groups & friendships with classmates  
Vocabulary: US classroom, popular majors and courses

**Week 5**  
Fri 10/5  
Textbook Part 2: U.S. Inventions and Inventors: Microwave, Dishwasher, Laser, iPod  
Vocabulary: Inventions, technology, medicine

**Week 6**  
Fri 10/12  
Textbook Part 4: Holidays and Special Days: New Year’s Celebrations, Labor Day; Holidays this semester: Halloween,
Thanksgiving, Christmas, Hanukah
Vocabulary: Holiday items and ideas

Week 7  Textbook Part 4 (continued)

Fri 10/19  Textbook Part 6: US Arts and Entertainment: Walt Disney, Maya Lin, Ella Fitzgerald, Elvis, Michael Jackson, Modern Celebrities
Vocabulary: Jobs in the Arts, pop culture

Week 8  Textbook Part 6 (continued)

Fri 10/26  

Week 9  Textbook Part 7: The Story of Young America:

Fri 11/2  Christopher Columbus, Paul Revere’s Ride, The Railroad, Politics Today and the Election
Vocabulary: History, politics

Week 10  Textbook Part 7 (continued)

Fri 11/9  **Project guidelines – begin project**

Week 11  Social Media and the Internet: Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, YouTube, Online Etiquette and Safety

Fri 11/16  Vocabulary: Security & privacy, internet slang

**Fri 11/23**  NO CLASS – Happy Thanksgiving!

Week 12  Social Media and the Internet (continued)

Fri 11/30  Work on project in class

Week 13  Review & Semester Wrap-up

12/7

**Final Project Due: Friday, December 14 1:00pm-3:40pm***

*Due to department policy, the final project due date cannot be changed for anyone under any circumstances. The final project must be given in order to pass the course.*