The Cultural Basis of Teaching English as an International Language[1]

by Sandra Lee McKay

One of the most complex problems in English teaching today is determining the cultural basis of teaching an international language such as English. In order to examine this problem, it is necessary to consider the characteristics of an international language.

The Characteristics of an International Language

Clearly, one feature of an international language is that it must be widely spoken. Today, however, English is not the most widely spoken language in the world because it is only spoken by one-third the number of native speakers of Mandarin. What makes English distinct at the present time is not the number of native speakers, but the growing number of L2 speakers of English. In fact, Graddol (1999) maintains that, in the not-too-distant future, the number of L2 speakers of English will surpass the number of native speakers. This development supports Brutt-Griffler's (2002) contention that one of the central features of an international language is that it tends to establish itself alongside other local languages in a multilingual context, resulting in many bilingual speakers of the language. Presently, many of the bilingual speakers of English have no desire to acquire the culture of native speakers of English because, unlike immigrants to English-speaking countries, they will not be living and interacting in a native-English-speaking context.

For the purposes of clarifying the cultural basis of teaching English as an international language (EIL), perhaps the most significant features of an international language are those described by Smith (1976), who argues that, in reference to an international language,

- there is no necessity for L2 speakers to internalize the cultural norms of native speakers of that language
- an international language becomes de-nationalized
- the purpose of teaching an international language is to facilitate the communication of learners' ideas and culture in an English medium

If one accepts these features of an international language, then the entire notion that learners of EIL need to learn the culture of native speakers of English must be challenged. The question is how does culture interact with language teaching?

The Role of Culture in Language Teaching

Culture plays a role in language teaching in two important ways. First, culture is significant in the linguistic dimension of the language itself, affecting the semantic, pragmatic, and discourse levels of the language.

Second, culture is operative in a pedagogical sense in that choices need to be made regarding the cultural content of language materials and the cultural basis of the teaching methodology. Let us first look at the linguistic dimension of culture in language teaching.

Linguistic Dimension of Culture

On a semantic level, culture is embedded in many of the lexical phrases of English, for example, in well-known U.S. English phrases such as *big stick diplomacy*, *yellow journalism*, and *Uncle Tom*. In terms of teaching EIL, if there is no need for L2 speakers to internalize the cultural norms of native speakers, as Smith contends, then the teaching of such phrases in an English class needs to be questioned. Thus, one important choice that teachers of EIL need to make is what lexical phrases should be included in an EIL curriculum.

In reference to the pragmatic level, many current English textbooks devote attention to teaching appropriateness in language use. Some texts, for example, point out that, when receiving a compliment, learners of English should acknowledge and accept the compliment with a simple response, such as "thank you." However, research in cross-cultural pragmatics has clearly demonstrated that there are vast differences in how various cultures enact a particular speech act so that, in some cultures, it is typical to downplay a compliment, leading one to react with responses such as, "I could have done better." If learners of an international language do not need to internalize the cultural norms of native speakers, then there is no reason why L2 speakers of EIL need to conform to the pragmatic rules of native speakers of English.

A similar situation occurs at the discourse level of language teaching. Research in contrastive rhetoric has demonstrated that there are differences in how various cultures develop particular genres, such as that used in a business letter or an argumentative essay. Again, the question arises as to what extent learners of EIL need to internalize the discourse rules of native speakers of English. In this instance, the

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44 rhetorical goals of the L2 speaker of English, as well as the intended audience of the text, need to be considered when making curriculum
45 choices in EIL teaching.

46 *Pedagogical Dimension of Culture*

47 Culture also plays an important role in teaching materials and methods. Cortazzi and Jin (1999) distinguish three types of cultural
48 information that can be used in language textbooks and materials:

49 1.   source culture materials, which draw on the learners' own culture as content
50 2.   target culture materials, which use the culture of a country where English is spoken as an L1
51 3.   international target culture materials, which use a great variety of cultures in English- and non-English-speaking countries
52   around the world

53 Many existing English textbooks place a heavy emphasis on target culture materials, including native-English-speaker names and places.
54 However, if one of the main purposes of teaching an international language is to facilitate the communication of learners' ideas and
55 culture in an English medium, then there are many reasons why source culture materials should be used in the teaching of EIL. Presently,
56 many countries are beginning to do this. In Chile, for example, the required texts used in junior and senior high schools, entitled *Go for*
57 *Chile, Books* 1 and *2* (Mugglestone, Elsworth, & Rose, 1999, 2000), include Chilean topics and places (see also McKay, in press).

58 Teaching methodology is another area of language teaching that reflects a particular cultural perspective. One of the most popular
59 methods in English language teaching today is communicative language teaching (CLT), with its emphasis on oral skills and group work.
60 Although the method developed largely in English-speaking countries for use with immigrants, it has spread to many non-English-
61 speaking countries, often promoted by so-called teaching experts from native-English-speaking countries. However, in many countries,
62 such as Chile, China, Japan, and Korea, the appropriateness of this method in light of the local context and learners' needs has been
63 challenged. In Chile, for example, an earlier emphasis on developing students' oral skills that occurred with the adoption of CLT has been
64 replaced by a policy approved by the Ministry of Education that requires 80% of the high school curriculum to be devoted to developing
65 students' reading and writing skills. It is therefore important when selecting a methodology for a particular context for teachers to
66 consider the local needs of the students rather than assume that a method that is effective in one context is effective in all contexts. (For a
67 more comprehensive discussion of methods in EIL teaching, see McKay, 2002.)

The Cultural Basis of EIL Teaching

69 Whereas, traditionally, the cultural basis of English teaching has been closely linked to the culture of native-English-speaking countries,
70 the fact that English has become an international language offers a serious challenge to this approach. In dealing with the linguistic and
71 pedagogical aspect of culture in language teaching, what is needed is a full recognition that English today has become denationalized.
72 Hence, it is local educators who need to determine what linguistic information, cultural content, and teaching methodology are most
73 appropriate for the local context so that learners will be able to use English to tell others about their own culture.

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85 Sandra Lee McKay (smckay@sfsu.edu) teaches at San Francisco State University, San Francisco, California, in the United States.