

‘CULTURE’ AS A SKILL IN UNDERGRADUATE EFL CLASSROOMS: THE BANGLADESHI REALITIES

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Abstract: As regards the status of English in today’s globalization era, ‘culture’ has turned out to be an essential component in the teaching and learning of English. Some Applied Linguists have even described it as the fifth skill—after listening, speaking, reading and writing—which must be handled adequately in EFL classrooms. By appreciating and acquiring the cultural knowledge, values and skills associated with the different varieties of English, EFL students could develop their cultural sensitivities using English as the medium of instruction despite their resentment motivation. Eventually, students would be able to identify and respond to both culturally significant and inappropriate information and think positively about being a part of international environment. Given the growing importance of EFL teaching in Bangladesh, this study investigated the roles of ‘culture’ in the undergraduate EFL classrooms. That is, the study carefully evaluated the effort and capabilities of the teachers in dealing with culturally sensitive issues in their materials, and the influences of cultural items of English on students’ learning. The study made constructive recommendations for English teachers to have successful implementation of cultural skills in their ELT activities regarding Bangladeshi socio-cultural realities which would make students become effective workforce in this challenging era.

Keywords: cultural sensitivity, resentment motivation, globalization, target culture, EFL classrooms

Right from primary to tertiary levels, the teaching and learning of English in Bangladesh has whirled round the four skills, i.e. listening, speaking, reading and writing. Given the reality the Bangladesh does not have any pragmatic lan-

guage policy, the natures and procedures of these four skills have been unsystematic and marred by controversies. One of the misconceptions that has permeated the teaching of English at the primary and secondary levels of Bangladesh is the conviction that language is merely a code and, once mastered—predominantly by memorizing its grammatical rules and some aspects of the social context in which it is embedded—the ‘language is essentially translatable into another’ (Kramersch, 1993, p. 1). This is one of the prime reasons why English, despite its dominant official existence in the curricula, has still been a language of fear and resentment for the masses (Shahed, 2001).

In such a context several ELT professionals have argued that since English cannot be deemed as isolated entity and consequently presented in classrooms like a culture-less code; the need for imparting the cultural knowledge associated with English is a necessity. More precisely, teachers should deal with it as the ‘fifth skill’ inside classrooms. If we keep in mind McKay’s view (2003) that, English—in its process of achieving the status of global lingua franca—has changed in terms of how it relates to culture. Therefore, the issue of students’ developing cultural awareness and sensitivity, and eventually cultural competence, has attained crucial importance. According to McKay, culture plays a significant role in language pedagogy in two ways: (1) cultural knowledge often acts as the basis for the content and topics used in language materials and classroom discussions; and (2) pragmatic standards are frequently based on particular cultural models. Subsequently, she went on to highlight that the selection of the ‘culture’ to use in both these areas of teaching depends on careful consideration with regard to the teaching of the particular target language. Unfortunately, this issue has yet been properly addressed in the Bangladeshi ELT arena.

‘Language does not exist apart from culture, that is, from the socially inherited assemblage of practices and beliefs that determines the texture of our lives’ (Sapir, 1970, p. 207). In a sense, it is ‘a key to the cultural past of a society’ (Salzmann, 1998, p. 41), ‘a guide to “social reality”’ (Sapir, 1929, p. 209, cited in Salzmann, 1998, p. 41). Ethnographers such as Buttjes (1990), Ochs & Schieffelin (1984), Poyatos, (1985), and Peters & Boggs, (1986) have attempted to show that ‘language and culture are from the start inseparably connected’ (Buttjes, 1990, p. 55, cited in Lessard-Clouston, 1997). The process of becoming a competent member of society is realized through exchanges of language in particular social situations. Thus, language acquisition does not follow a universal sequence, but differs across cultures. And so, language

teachers' primary concern must not be with grammatical input, but with the transmission of socio-cultural knowledge of the language as well as the paralinguistic patterns and the kinesics of the culture of that language.

Language teaching is culture teaching and teachers do their students a great disservice in placing emphasis on the former, to the detriment of the latter. Buttjes (1990, p. 55 in Lessard-Clouston, 1997) notes, 'language teachers need to go beyond monitoring linguistic production in the classroom and become aware of the complex and numerous processes of intercultural mediation that any foreign language learner undergoes.' Hence, to describe the relationship between language and culture; Samovar, Porter, & Jain (1981, p. 24) observe:

Culture and communication are inseparable because culture not only dictates who talks to whom, about what, and how the communication proceeds, it also helps to determine how people encode messages, the meanings they have for messages, and the conditions and circumstances under which various messages may or may not be sent, noticed, or interpreted... Culture...is the foundation of communication.

Sapir (1921, p. 215) asserts that 'language, race, and culture are not necessarily correlated', only to admit later on that 'language and our thought-grooves are inextricably interrelated, are, in a sense, one and the same' (Sapir, 1921, pp. 217-218). According to his lights, 'culture may be defined as what a society does and thinks. Language is a particular how of thought' In addition, Hall (1981, p. 36) aligns himself with Humboldt and Bourdieu in dubbing language 'one of the dominant threads in all cultures'. In a similar vein, Bruner (1996, p. 3) says that 'although meanings are "in the mind," they have their origins and their significance in the culture in which they are created'. And he adds, 'human beings do not terminate at their own skins; they are expressions of a culture' (Bruner, 1990, p. 12). Furthermore, we could envision the possibility of 'certain linguistic features making certain modes of perception more prevalent or more probable' (Henle, 1970, p. 18). Lexical and grammatical categories of a language have been assumed to determine how its speakers conceptualize the world around them. Brutt-Griffler's (2002) propagation of the term 'macro-acquisition' should be interesting in this regard. It refers to the spread of any international language through acquisition by lots of individuals in speech

communities (instead of through speaker migration), hence, the connectivity of culture with language appears to be a natural phenomenon.

The question that may arise now is: if language and culture are so intricately intertwined, why should we overtly focus on culture when there are other aspects of the language curriculum which need more attention? To answer the questions, there are some factors need to be considered, they are: (1) that learning English, the cultural knowledge and its skills are identical even though culture is inherent in what EFL teachers teach; (2) including culture in the EFL curriculum helps avoid the stereotypes; (3) teaching culture in the English classroom is to enable students to take control of their own learning as well as to achieve autonomy by evaluating and questioning the wider context within which the learning of English is embedded. Tomalin & Stempleski (1993, p. 7), modifying Seelye's (1988) 'seven goals of cultural instruction', may provide an answer pertinent to the question posed. According to them, the teaching of culture has the following goals and is of and in itself a means of accomplishing them:

- To help students develop an understanding of the fact that all people exhibit culturally-conditioned behaviors,
- To help students develop an understanding that social variables such as age, sex, social class, and place of residence influence the ways in which people speak and behave,
- To help students become more aware of conventional behavior in common situations in the target culture,
- To help students increase their awareness of the cultural connotations of words and phrases in the target language,
- To help students develop the ability to evaluate and refine generalizations about the target culture, in terms of supporting evidence,
- To help students develop the necessary skills to locate and organize information about the target culture, and
- To stimulate students' intellectual curiosity about the target culture, and to encourage empathy towards people.

The issue of 'cultural awareness raising' can give us a wider understanding of these points. A 'good morning' means nothing to a foreign user of English other than that it is a form of greeting. But the moment s/he understands

that there is a lot more to it—like the vagaries of the European weather and an Englishman's sense of relief in finding a sunny morning—it can bring in a new level of meaning to the language. To the foreign learner, the greeting would suddenly become personal—not just a routine complimentary stuff.

In short, the 'knowledge of the grammatical system of a language [grammatical competence] has to be complemented by the understanding of culture-specific meanings [communicative or rather cultural competence]' (Byram, Morgan et al., 1994, p. 4). Culture in language learning challenges the students' ability to make sense of the world around them (Kramsch, 1993, p. 1). Therefore, the present study was intended to find out the status of 'culture' as a skill in Bangladeshi EFL classrooms.

METHOD

In this study, the researcher focused on the EFL courses at the undergraduate levels of the private universities. The reasons behind such focus are two-fold. First, Bangladeshi private universities, on an average, have three functional EFL courses in the curricula of the popular programs they offer (i.e. Business Administration, Computer Science & Engineering, Electrical & Electronics Engineering, Law, English, Economics etc); these functional courses cover all the four skills required for students' future professional careers. Second, students come to study in this level after completing ten years of Secondary education and two years of Higher Secondary education (where English has a dominant stature in the curricula) and they are expected to be quite conversant at least in English reading and writing skills.

Therefore, it was realistic and interesting to find out from this level how teachers have been dealing with this 'culture' issue regardless the skills they emphasize. A questionnaire comprising 14 close-ended and 4 open-ended questions was distributed among fifty-four (54) teachers teaching at four top-ranking private universities. The items directly centered round the issues like how the printed and electronic classroom materials address culture; whether or not those are adequate; what kind of 'English' the teachers normally emphasize in their materials; what or how the efforts of the teachers in dealing with culturally sensitive issues in their materials are; what sort of positive or negative attitude influence the cultural items of English -have on students' learning. In addition, face to face interview with five teachers were conducted concerning the issues and elaborately discussed from various perspectives.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Findings

Teachers and Cultural Sensitivity

An overwhelming majority of 51 teachers (out of 54) agreed that they were aware of the need of cultural sensitization of their students as that would make the students become flexible and quick learners. The same number of teachers also 'agreed' to the fact that an English teacher should develop the awareness and skills to recognize culturally significant information and help students explore them with sensitivity and tolerance.

In response to another relevant query as to what approach teachers usually take while dealing with culturally sensitive items in their ELT materials, 49 teachers said that they 'try to make their students understand the meanings and contexts of those items in terms of the target culture.' Five teachers said that they 'explain those items briefly to their students but give them the impression that those are not important issues at all.'

However, it was interesting to find out the teachers' feeling about their students' attitude. Forty teachers 'agreed' and 14 teachers 'partially agreed' that students as a whole are not interested to achieve cultural sensitivity; they are more interested in attending the English class to 'learn some English'.

Students' Difficulty in Culturally Diversified Items of English

Thirty eight (38) teachers expressed the view that students faced difficulty in dealing with culturally diversified items in all the four skills. Nine and seven teachers categorically mentioned 'reading skills' and 'listening' skills respectively as the problem areas. The term 'culturally diversified items' referred to any kind of English words, phrases or sentences that seem alien or different or unmatchable in terms of Bangladeshi cultural orientations. The following are the reasons narrated by the teachers.

Firstly, as regards reading activities, sizable numbers of undergraduate students are either slow readers or pretentious readers. In such circumstance, students often become reluctant to read the text if the topic itself is culturally different. If the topic is okay, they read, but that is also 'resentment reading' as they read just because their teacher is forcing them to read. Also, whenever

they encounter culturally different words, either they skip those words without trying to understand the meaning, or ask for clarifications awkwardly (particularly in case of taboo items) which cause embarrassments in mixed-gender classes. Secondly, in listening activities, students listen with very poor understanding or interpretation; in most cases, they consciously overhear the culturally different items and focus on the words or sentences they understand. Thirdly, in case of speaking and writing activities, students more or less show thorough reluctance to take over any topic which is culturally alien to them. Finally, students on the whole display a sort of avoidance tendency in dealing with culturally diversified items. Of course, a number of students do attempt to work sincerely, but the problem is: they cannot relate those items to the local environments spontaneously. Those are exactly the reasons why an overwhelming number of 28 teachers 'partially agreed' that they found it problematic to handle culturally sensitive issues in the materials.

'Balancing act' by Teachers with Cultural Items

It should be interesting to note the responses of two related questions concerning the items in the reading texts used by teachers. On the one hand, teachers did explain their students the words or phrases that conveyed different meanings in different cultures, even having different meanings in UK and USA cultures. Forty three teachers said they 'always' did that while 11 teachers said they explained the meanings of the words or phrases if there was adequate time. On the other hand, in case of items that were related to the socio-cultural values of the target language only, but totally unknown to local students, 29 teachers said that they replaced them with identical items from Bangladeshi socio-cultural domains—only in case of urgent necessities, otherwise not. In the same line, 32 teachers 'partially agreed' to the statement that since culture is an inseparable part of FL teaching, they 'deliberately used cultural items in classrooms' while 22 teachers were undecided about it.

However, teachers strongly felt that students 'should get habituated with the diversified cultural issues related to English language that appeared in the teaching materials'; all 54 teachers 'agreed' to it.

The Impact of Globalization

Forty nine teachers have 'agreed' that the current status of English as a global language has made the 'culture' of English an important ingredient in

the EFL classrooms. Probably for this reason, teachers do not think that ‘what kind of English should be used and taught in classrooms’ is at all factor due to globalization. Thirty four teachers said that they used ‘all kinds of global versions of English’ regardless the situational demands and 20 teachers answered that they used British or American or may be both kinds of English in accordance with the situational demands. Nobody displayed any bias or inclination toward the native varieties only. During interviews, teachers said that globalization has rather allowed English to become ‘everybody’s language’ and thus, different varieties of English have gained solid foundation vis-à-vis the native varieties. Some teachers also highlighted that the current global status of English has somewhat compelled the native English speaking circles to follow a uniform standard of English that is easily recognized and intelligible to the global audience.

‘Culturally Significant’ vs. ‘Culturally Peripheral’ Issues

Forty eight teachers felt that Bangladeshi students were not capable enough to discriminate between the ‘culturally significant’ and the ‘culturally peripheral’ issues in their classroom materials. Some teachers during interview said that even if they did, there was always this fear of ‘losing track’ in the learning process, i.e. they may wrongly accept a culturally sensitive or unacceptable issue in a positive light while overlooking another crucial issue that they should actually learned and apprehended the culturally significant and culturally peripheral issues in the classroom.

Getting Exposed to All Kinds of English Cultures

Finally, teachers came up with a mixed set of responses to the query whether or not it is practically possible for Bangladeshi undergraduate students to learn or get exposed to all kinds of cultures associated with English. Fifty two teachers answered in affirmative out of whom 43 mentioned ‘abilities and skills of the teachers’ and ‘students’ enthusiasm and quality’ as the two essential criteria. Nine teachers mentioned ‘facilities of the teaching-learning environment’ as the added criterion. Two teachers deemed such an issue as impossibility.

Discussion

The issues of 'Teachers and cultural sensitivity' prove the points that Bangladeshi EFL teachers are actually aware of the importance of incorporating 'culture' as a skill in their classroom teaching, and accordingly they attempt to deal with it seriously; it is rather the students who are least enthusiastic about the matter. The reason would be evident from the reality that Bangladeshi students in their secondary level possess 'resentment motivation' (i.e. they learn English simply because it is a subject in their curriculum) more than 'instrumental motivation' (Shahed, 1998) which they find difficult to overcome in the tertiary level. Barring the learners from English medium backgrounds, most of the students in their schools are at the mercy of untrained English teachers who hardly know about the cultural bondage of English (Shahed, 1998).

The findings under the issue of 'Students' difficulty in culturally diversified items of English' further support the reasons mentioned in the previous discussion that students have inabilities in getting out of the 'resentment mindset' which they created during their secondary level education. They have learned to view English as 'a tool for materialistic enhancement' where grammatical and sentential rules play dominant roles more than the contextualized interpretations (Shahed, 2001). It will be relevant to narrate Cortazzi and Jin's (1999) three types of cultural information used in language textbooks and materials: (a) 'source culture materials' that draw on the learners' own culture as content, (b) 'target culture materials' that use the culture of a country where English is the first language, and (c) 'international target culture materials' that use a great variety of cultures in English and non-English-speaking countries around the world. The teachers point out that English language textbooks in non-native countries have been frequently using target culture topics as some ELT educators believe that these would motivate learners. However, in reality, such content appears to be largely irrelevant, uninteresting, or confusing. Therefore, it is hardly surprising that Bangladeshi students carry with them a sort of mechanical mindset regarding English when they come to undergrad classes.

The issue of 'Balancing act by teachers with cultural items' match with the reality that students do have difficulties in cultural items, and subsequently, teachers exercise caution and a sort of balancing technique in dealing with them. While 'explaining foreign cultural items' seems to be an easier task for

teachers, 'replacing those with identical local items' and 'deliberately using those in class materials' appears to be a hard or avoidable job. McKay (2003) cites Cortazzi and Jin's (1999) propagation of using 'source culture' material which implies that using localized items gives students an opportunity to learn more about their own culture as well as the language needed to explain these cultural elements in English. Such a situation also places local bilingual teachers in a position in which they can explain particular cultural events or cultural behavior to students who are not familiar with that particular aspect of the culture. McKay (2003) also provides the examples of textbook projects in Morocco and Chile to prove the efficacy of using localized items in ELT books. In the early 1990, the Moroccan Education Ministry implemented a textbook project in which Moroccan culture formed the basis for textbook content rather than target culture information. More recently, Chile has developed an entire series of textbooks, entitled 'Go for Chile' which incorporates a good deal of localized cultural content.

The findings under the issue of 'Impact of globalization' prove that due to the increase of international businesses in Bangladesh and consequently, the high frequency of foreign travels by local entrepreneurs, businessmen, corporate employees and workers; English skills, added with cultural knowledge, have become a pivotal factor here. Also the massive boom of global electronic English media has played its role in enhancing the need for culture in English teaching. Lots of people learn English because they want access to scientific and technological information, international organizations, global economic trade, and higher education, and knowledge of English makes such access possible. In his book 'The Alchemy of English', Kachru (1986) maintains, 'knowing English is like possessing the fabled Aladdin's lamp, which permits one to open the linguistic gates to international business, technology, science and travel. In short, English provides linguistic power.'

In case of students handling the 'culturally significant' and 'culturally peripheral' items, there are chances of additional hazards for Bangladeshi students—particularly for those who are unaware of foreign cultural orientations. Some students may reject parts of their local culture without knowing or accepting comparable parts of the second culture. They may also find themselves repeatedly facing cultural interference as the rules and values of one conflict with the other in a given situation. When this happens, either one culture 'wins' or students suffer from emotional and cognitive stress (Saville-Troike, 1978). Thus, teachers' task would be to stimulate students' interest in the target cul-

ture, and to help establish the English classroom 'not so much as a place where the language is taught, but as one where opportunities for learning of various kinds are provided through the interactions that take place between the participants' (Ellis, 1992, p. 171, cited in Kramsch, 1993, p. 245). This participatory approach would greatly help students in this regard.

The responses regarding students' 'Getting exposed to all kinds of English cultures' overwhelmingly highlight the bright side of the entire issue. Let us dwell on this one by one. In relation to the teaching-learning facilities, private universities in Bangladesh stand on much favorable position—especially the top-ranking ones—compared to the public universities. The classrooms are fully equipped with ultramodern multimedia gazettes suitable for audio-video activities. Teachers are individually provided with necessary logistic support. Thus, the issue depends jointly on teachers' capabilities and students' enthusiasm. While teachers' skill development is an ongoing process to which the leading private universities are attentive and careful for their own reputation's sake, the students' enthusiasm and quality is something that needs to be addressed thoroughly. Making students exposed to the benefits of appreciating and acquiring the cultural knowledge, values and skills associated with the different varieties of English, teachers can develop their cultural sensitivities using English as the medium of instruction. Cortazzi and Jin (1999) talk about several advantages of using what they call 'international target culture' materials. By using such materials, teachers could easily exemplify the manner in which English is effectively being used by bilingual users of English to communicate with others for international purposes. Students could directly get exposed to the lexical, grammatical, and phonological variation in the present-day use of English. They could also illustrate cross-cultural pragmatics in which bilingual users of English create their own rules of appropriateness. In this way, students could be helped to identify and respond to both culturally significant and inappropriate information and think positively about being a part of international environment. Several teachers in interview sessions mentioned that it is possible because they are ready to impart the skills on their students; in fact, there is little dearth of teachers' enthusiasm and efforts.

CONCLUSIONS AND SUGGESTIONS

Admittedly, no teacher can teach culture any more than s/he can teach anyone how to breathe. As Thanasoulas (2001) proposes, what teachers can do is

try to show the way, to teach about culture rather than to posit a specific way of seeing things. By bringing to the fore selective elements of the target culture, and focusing on those traits that are of importance to the members of the target community, teachers can make students aware that there are no such things as superior and inferior cultures and that there are differences among people within the target culture as well.

Teachers must learn to understand both the medium and the content of what they are teaching, and learn to be sensitive to the differences between what they are teaching and what their students bring to the classroom. It should be almost trite to mention that by teaching culture in the EFL class, Bangladeshi teachers would actually be helping the students respect other societies, and eventually become global in the genuine sense of the term. As Tomalin (2008) rightly says, it is an attitudinal change that is expressed through the use of language.

Based on the findings of Bangladeshi EFL realities at the undergraduate level, this study comes up with the following categorical suggestions.

Firstly, teachers need to be prepared in order to talk or bring culture wherever it is relevant—regardless the students' extent of enthusiasm. At the same time, teachers should unanimously decide the extent of cultural input in their EFL lessons and the ways to impart such knowledge.

Secondly, classroom lessons and multimedia presentations should include systematically organized culture-based items which would unconsciously drag students into global environment inside the classrooms. This, despite being a conscious activity by the teachers, would be an unconscious natural act on students' part.

Thirdly, teachers should use task-based learning and enjoyable discovery techniques to help students learn for themselves. In other words, teachers would ask them to work on projects. Teachers would take the role of a facilitator. For instance, teachers can ask students to find some information from internet about different eating habits in different countries and ask them to give lectures.

Finally, in order to raise the cultural awareness of students, meticulously prepared cultural items should be taught as a component under any or all of the four skills. Tomalin (2008) terms it as 'culture spot' or 'culture corner' that can be incorporated in specific lessons. This would obviously be a conscious activity on both teachers' and students' parts.

These would, hopefully to a considerable extent, ensure the application of making culture the fifth skill inside the Bangladeshi undergraduate English classrooms.

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