

Incorporating Culture into the Production of Materials; purpose and precautions

Jack Brajcich

1.0 Introduction & Review of the Literature

Underlying the notion that culture should or needs to be incorporated into the production of language materials is the belief that language and culture interact (Stern, 1992). In Japan, English as a foreign language is most often taught with the primary target community being either Britain or the United States. Stern (1992) cites that language and culture form the object of study and enquiry and that practice activities need to be directed to the features of the language and its society or culture. Dimpleby & Burton (1985) define culture as being a collection of beliefs, values, and behaviors distinctive to a large group of people and expressed through various forms of communication. Obviously, cultures vary internationally and the acquisition of sociolinguistic rules can be greatly facilitated by teachers who have the necessary information and the sensitivity to guide their students to interpret values and patterns they would otherwise have difficulty understanding (Wolfson, 1989). This paper looks at how culture may be incorporated into the production of materials and why it is important to consider doing so. It also looks at some of the assumptions language teachers may make when introducing culture in the classroom together with some words of caution afterwards. Essentially, what I personally intend to contribute in this paper is a critical analysis of my attempt to incorporate culture into the production of materials. To begin, a transcript is presented below to form the basis for a lesson which attempts to incorporate

culture into the classroom for language use.

2.0 Transcript. Below is an extract from a phone-in program on local (Birmingham, U.K.) radio.

M = the program host (male); F = the caller (female)

- 1 M: Hello (name)
- 2 F: I just wondered if you're interested. There's a gypsy and the poor fellow's very ill and (pause) he's a gypsy fellow in the Infirmary. And they've had over six hundred people visiting him. They're coming by the hundreds and they're camping all round the- the all in the passages you know. And I've never heard anything like this before, have you?
- 3 M: Erm not- not in er it's in the hospital is it?
- 4 F: Yes, yes. In fact it's been that (*so) bad erm the staff couldn't cope and they've had to lock up at nights
- 5 M: Mm
- 6 F: to get- to get everybody out. Well I don't know what whether they succeeded or not - that's what the idea was.
- 7 M: Gypsy communities are very loyal indeed
- 8 F: They've come from America
- 9 M: Yeah
- 10 F: They've come from all over
- 11 M: Mm
- 12 F: I've heard of funerals. I've never heard of 'em visiting in a big- in a hospital like this.
- 13 M: I just don't know. No I - I haven't heard of it but I mean I- I dare say
- 14 F: I just- I wondered if you'd just be interested that was all
- 15 M: Yes it's
- 16 F: You know it's something a bit different
- 17 M: It is, isn't it.

- 18 F: It's fascinated me really. And er I feel awful (*awfully) sorry for the fellow but I mean they say that on Tuesday they was (*were) coming in by the hundred
- 19 M: Oh yeah. But I mean to say they are very loyal communities indeed.
- 20 F: Well what is the bond between them?
- 21 M: Erm well I don't know. It's just- it's just camaraderie, I suppose. Maybe they're related. I don't know whether they're his.
- 22 F: Well it's a lot
- 23 M: relatives or what
- 24 F: Well it's a lot to be related. But to come from all over like that you know
- 25 M: Yeah. I mean this is a very senior gypsy is it who's- who's ill?
- 26 F: Well actually he lives in a house and it's not far from me
- 27 M: Mm

3.0 Ways of Incorporating Culture into the Production of Materials: A Lesson

As mentioned in the introduction, the transcript above is intended to be used for the basis of a lesson, preferably in a small group at an upper-intermediate/lower-advanced level in Japan. Most of the students would be learning English with the specific purposes of learning English for travel and/or business. I must add that I assume that the learners will, as Wolfson (1989) summarizes, make the attempt to adapt, learn to interpret, and even decide to emulate to some degree the behavior of the host community (in this case Britain) when interacting with its members.

3.1 Aim

The specific aim or purpose of this lesson will be to instruct the students on how to communicate negative sentiments within the accepted social parameters of an English speaking environment. In this lesson, I need to mention, my intention is to present to the students ways in which such negative sentiments

can be “softened”. D’Amico-Reisner (1983), interestingly, terms what we call “softened” negative sentiments “dressed disapproval”. It is my hope that the students will be able to incorporate what I intend to highlight here into their sets of beliefs and knowledge for the purpose of creating and maintaining what Damen (1987: 302) calls a “world view”.

3.2 Supplementation, Adaptation and Procedure

The following is a detailed account, or procedure, of how and why the transcript will be supplemented and adapted to incorporate a cultural focus on the language. Additional analysis is given afterwards in both defense of and criticism of the processes presented.

3.2.1 Orientation

To orient the students with the aim of the lesson, first an authentic Japanese radio talk show will be used as an example of how people may communicate negative sentiments within the accepted social parameters of the students’ speaking environment.

3.2.2 Topic Introduction

To introduce the topic (expressed in the Aim, 3.1), first the teacher will have the students brainstorm and list how complaints, both in English and Japanese, could be made in public. Then, the teacher will have the students compare their findings with each other. Second, the teacher will ask the question “Have you ever heard a conversation, perhaps on a cellular phone, in public in which the speaker complained about something?” and let the students discuss their experiences and feelings about what took place. Finally, the teacher will set the scene for the text of which they have not yet received a copy by telling them what they are going to hear a radio phone-in talk show in Birmingham, U.K. between a male radio host and a female caller.

3.2.3 Text Interaction

Here, students will be asked to interact with the text they will hear by doing at least one, or ideally all, of the listening activities listed below:

1. Arranging in the order presented in the talk show transcript above color-coded cue cards with words on them (these words could be underlined in the transcript).
2. Jigsaw listening- student piece together specified parts of the transcript (written on cards) in the order they are presented in the listening (example: four cards consisting of lines 1-6, 7-12, 13-18 and 19-27).
3. Cloze exercise (fill in the blanks). See example below:

1 M: Hello (name)

2 F: I just _____ if you are interested...

3.2.4 Production

At this stage of the lesson students will be given the opportunity to have small group discussions/conversations from situational topics provided by the teacher. Such topics could be specific to the students' culture/society. Some could even be controversial. For example: What do you think of "tanshinfuni" (in which men are sent to work in other areas of Japan, separated from their families for up to 2-3 years)?, What do you think of the drivers in this city?, and so forth.

3.2.5 Wrap-up

To cap the lesson, the teacher may say that "I know it's time to go but let's go on for another 30 minutes" in order to encourage further discussions/conversations on the topics given in 3.2.4 allowing the students to use what they have learned and become more culturally aware of what and how things may be expressed.

3.2.6 Homework

Students will be asked to think of real situations in which they experienced hearing, receiving or voicing negative sentiments publicly, emphasizing what was said and how it was expressed.

3.2.7 Options

The following could be taught in addition to the above so that the students could become more aware of how negative sentiments are expressed.

1. Focus on intonation/stress by marking stress words and patterns.
2. Focus on meaning of language via discourse markers by matching phrases that are close in meaning.

4.0 Analysis of the Materials

I have no deep criticism of the content/procedure of the lesson above. I do, however upon reflection, have a few concerns about the assumptions of the learners and the overall aim of the lesson. First of all, I failed to remember that I am teaching EFL and not ESL. The important difference here lies in the fact that there may be a far lesser need for the students to communicate (such negative sentiments) within their own environment. Without the reinforcement of an English-speaking environment, creating perhaps a motivational lack to perform what is required or expected of them in this lesson would be a major concern (Ellis, 1996). Another concern is the question of whether or not such mastery of a specific behavior (expressing negative sentiments in an English-speaking environment) necessarily leads to well-functioning behavior for communication (Skutnabb-Kangas & Phillipson, 1983). Two assumptions the Nostrands (1970) make are that students should demonstrate an intellectual curiosity about the target culture and an empathy towards its people, and also demonstrate an understanding that people act the way they do because they are

using options the society values for satisfying basic physical and psychologically needs. I interpret “curiosity” and “understanding” as merely an awareness of the foreign culture without going so far in the EFL classroom as to expect/force students to transfer this awareness into some communicative skill/performance which may have little chance of being readily reinforced. I do not think that we can expect learners to change their personalities or their values concerning proper behavior in such a situation as our group presented. I think what is more valuable is that the learners understand what is meant by the words and expressions involving negative sentiments and be able to respond to them appropriately (Wolfson, 1989). Such appropriateness is often already formed in the learner from the learners’ own culture. For example, in some cultures, such as Japan’s, proverbs and other forms of indirect expressions are regularly used as a means of avoiding the risk of even the most indirect spontaneous expressions of disapproval (Wolfson, 1989). This last assumption could wreak havoc on what I am aiming to do inside of the learners’ own culture. As a final note, I believe that as language instructors, we need to make sure the materials we present in the classroom fit the needs of our students (Wolfson, 1989). It could be argued that this does not seem to be the case here.

5.0 Conclusion: Assumptions & Findings

Below is a list of first my assumptions and later my findings in the paper.

Assumptions;

1. Language and culture interact and form the object of study and enquiry.
2. Practice activities need to be directed to the features of the language, its society and culture.
3. Acquisition of sociolinguistic rules can be greatly facilitated by the teacher.
4. Learners will attempt to adapt, learn to interpret, and even decide to emulate to some degree the behavior of the host community when interacting with its members.

Findings;

1. Teachers need to consider the distinctions between ESL and EFL.
2. Reinforcement from the English-speaking environment is essential to the introduction of culture in the language classroom.
3. Expected mastery of specific behavior for classroom language use needs to lead to functional behavior for communication.
4. Cultural awareness does not always mean that students will be able to or even willing to transfer such knowledge into a functional and communicative skill.
5. In some cultures (such as Japan's), expressions and proverbs are often used as a means to avoid spontaneous expressions of disapproval.
6. Materials must meet learners' needs.

It is debatable whether the exercises in sections 3.2.3 and 3.2.4 are what I assumed to be "cultural". I think they are simply listening or grammar exercises or entirely something else. In my assumptions, then, such exercises could draw the focus away from "culture" and move it more towards language. The "cultural" aspect of the lesson does not actually arise until 3.2.6!

The (cultural) point in the transcript is actually all about mainstream versus sub-cultures, or majority culture (hospitals, small families, etc.) versus a minority culture which is essentially tribal and involves an extended family, and so forth. The phone call is the point of intersection of the two conflicting structures. The bewilderment of M (host) shows this very clearly, and even F (caller) does not know how to react, except to say "It's fascinated me really" as a kind of voyeuristic interest.

Therefore, I see the text as being really too complex for the level (upper-intermediate/early advanced) I had chosen for this lesson. At this level, a much simpler passage could have been chosen. Moreover, instead of approaching this lesson from a language aspect, approaching it from its cultural context could

have been much more effective. This could be done by asking more advanced students questions such as, “Does Japan have minorities?”, “What does it do with them?”, “What happens when they enter (or conflict with) the mainstream culture?”, “Are people ‘fascinated’ with them?”, etc. One might, in Japan, find that the answers to such questions to be all negative which would lead to the big cultural point here: Does your country admit to having social problems? In the West the answer would certainly be “Yes”. In Japan, however, the answer could very well be “No” as Japan tends to suppress such issues. The students would have to be made aware that a greater degree of openness exists in the West, even if that openness is often bewildered and/or lacking in sophistication, as in the text. Students would have to know that such issues are discussed abroad and they would be expected to offer their opinions more readily than they do in Japan. This point needed to be examined more in this lesson plan, I think. The value systems of other cultures underlie their language and should not be neglected.

Perhaps culture can not be “incorporated” into language. Students can, however, be made more aware of other cultures and their values which could help them deal with cultural issues/topics more easily. Teachers of ESL/EFL need to consider how much they can focus on culture in the language classroom, realizing the abilities of their students. Unless their classes are quite advanced, language classes and culture classes may need to be kept separate. Certainly, this topic needs to be examined more to make teaching culture in the classroom more useful.

REFERENCES

- Damen, L., 1987. *Culture Learning: The Fifth Dimension in the Language Classroom*. Massachusetts: Addison-Wesley.
- D’Amico-Reisner, L., 1983. An analysis of the surface structure of disapproval exchanges. In N. Wolfson & E. Judd (Eds.), *Sociolinguistics and Language Acquisition*, pp. 103-115. Rowley, MA: Newbury House.

- Dimbleby, R. & G. Burton., 1985. *More Than- An Introduction to Communication*. Methuen.
- Ellis, G., 1996. *How culturally appropriate is the communicative approach?* In *ELT Journal* Volume 50/3 July 1996. Oxford University Press., 1996.
- Nostrand, F., and Howard L. Norstrand. 1970. *Testing understanding of the foreign culture*. In *Perspectives for Teachers of Latin American Culture.*, H. Ned Seelye (ed.), pp. 161-170. Springfield, IL: Superintendent of Public Instruction.
- Skutnabb-Kangas, T. and R. Phillipson. 1983. *Intercommunicative and Intercultural Competence*. ERIC Document Reproduction Service, ED 353778.
- Stern, HH., 1992. *Issues and Options in Language Teaching*. Oxford University Press.
- Wolfson, N. 1989. *Perspectives- Sociolinguistics and TESOL*. Newbury House.