Culture

It’s sometimes referred to as the ‘fifth skill’ after speaking, writing, listening and reading: culture. It seems to be one of those topics which is difficult to be ‘concrete’ about – what do we mean exactly by culture, and how is it relevant for us as language teachers and the learners in our classrooms?

Over to you: What is culture in the English classroom? Have a look at the statements and decide if you agree with any of them, and why/why not.

What is culture?

To start with, let’s try to define the word itself. Barry Tomalin is a respected trainer and writer with many years experience in this area. He defines culture broadly as the following:

1. values
2. knowledge
3. behaviour
4. skills

This definition, while broad, gives us a good starting point to refer back to. The values, knowledge, behaviour and skills we possess are most probably a product of our exposure to numerous external environments combined with our own individuality. Those external environments might range from family life, to the village we grow up in, the classmates at school or the country we live in.

What cultures are we part of?

In many ways then, we actually belong to numerous cultures. For example, I grew up in a village, so I identify very strongly with the close-knit village community – or at least, close-knit village community of the type that exist in the area of Britain I am from! So you could say that is a ‘village culture’.

Certainly British culture lives within everything I do – from references to my obsession with being polite. But beyond that, my ‘background’ cultures, I know am part of expat culture in Warsaw. In fact, I would say I am part of big city Central European culture – if you visit Warsaw, Berlin, Vienna, you are likely to enjoy similar experiences. Professionally I recognise the importance of ‘ELT’ culture, or perhaps more specifically the ‘TEFL’ culture that so many young British teachers living abroad are part of. The list seems endless!

Over to you: What cultures are you part of?

What does all this mean for English teachers?

Why is it important to think about this? Well, English is increasingly (and will continue to be so for a while yet) at the heart of globalisation – globalisation of commerce, the arts, education… it is the language people from all sorts of different backgrounds (i.e. cultures) use to communicate. As teachers, we need to be aware of that. We are not all the same! This awareness is central to the kind of behaviours and characteristics that we as educators should strive to maintain:

- Intercultural skills: it’s useful to be able to communicate with people from different backgrounds.
- Being comfortable about who we are: it’s important to understand who we are, where we have come from, why we are like we are.
- Being reflective and aware: of course, we need to constantly reflect and be aware to maintain the first two skills/behaviours!
Basically - the more you understand yourself, your place in the world and human relations, the better you will be able to bring that understanding into the classroom.

And what does it mean more practically?

It goes beyond our characteristics and behaviours – we need to think about things from a practical perspective too, in order to help our learners achieve their learning goals. Asking these three questions can help:

- Whose culture(s) do you belong to?

- Whose culture(s) do your learners belong to?

- Which people’s culture(s) do they need to communicate with?

We’ve already looked at the first one, and the second one is really about repeating the process we carried out earlier but for your learners. Of course some of their cultures will be the same (e.g. they all belong to, say, the ‘teen culture’ of the place you work in), but others will be different – e.g. some might live in a city, others in a village; some might come from a more privileged background than others.

As important as understanding your learners, is understanding who they are likely to need to communicate with in the future. Are they likely to be globally mobile, or more likely to be communicating with other English speakers in their own country? It can be difficult to predict, but you should have a general idea.

Whose culture? And whose language?

It’s easy to see why culture in ELT means different things to different people! Is it about the teachers, the learners, the future communication needs of the learners, the language you teach in class, the materials? Of course the answer is that all of these can be relevant!

What does all this mean for the learners?

Ultimately, we are teaching to enable our learners to achieve their learning goals. Given the increased globalisation we discussed earlier, and the potential future importance of English – whatever that may be, the following are very important skills/behaviours:

- Intercultural competence

- Sensitivity to differences

The two are inextricably linked – intercultural competence, or the ability to communicate/understand differences between cultures comes from the sensitivity to differences. Building that sensitivity to differences is a crucial role for us.

What to do in the classroom

Over to you: Whose language do we teach?

This leads us to perhaps the biggest question in this area: whose culture... and whose language? The days of ‘The Queen’s English’ are thankfully gone – more or less – but do you still think you should be teaching British English, or at least using it as the standard? Or do you only do that because the books you use do so? Perhaps a global English – English as a lingua Franca/Globish – is a more realistic target, but are there any materials in use in your country which allow this? Perhaps once again the best approach is to make learners aware of this.

Culture in the coursebook or curriculum in the past often appeared in specialist slots. Coursebooks might have had, for example, a text on something very ‘British’. Increasingly, this feature has been integrated throughout the materials, and – though probably not enough yet – moved away from an overemphasis on British or American cultural aspects.
Certainly the approach adopted by major publishers – building cultural awareness throughout, integrating it – seems to make more sense than isolating culture as a different stage of a lesson.

In fact, it’s difficult to think of a topic that doesn’t relate to culture in some way – ‘classic’ cultural topics, such as below, are common throughout the curriculum/coursebooks we use:

- Food
- Music
- Travel
- Manners
- Free time
- Sport

**What kind of approach can be useful?**

If you want to extend your coursebook or curriculum, and build this intercultural competence and awareness, certain types of activities can be very useful. Of course as well you might have access to the Internet, which makes learner-research possible – there is huge potential in accessing real-life examples or embodiments of different cultures online, though of course you need to think about safety.

The following activities can be useful:

- Discussions
- Quizzes
- Predictions
- Personalisation
- Awareness raising
- Authentic materials

Discussions are a good way of raising awareness, while quizzes can lead into them. Have you ever taken, say, an online quiz about different countries only to be surprised by the answers. Coursebooks have been using this approach for some time e.g. on the importance of punctuality in different cultures. Predictions too link into this.

Personalisation is an important approach you can easily integrate into your lessons. This is vital as it allows individualisation to be expressed among your learners.

**Conclusion**

Taking the definitions from the start of this workshop, we can see how important culture is – for us as teachers, for our learners, for the language we teach, the materials we use and the activities we carry out in lessons.

**Over to you:** You will now take a look at a series of videos on the Premier Skills English website, and think about how they can be useful to you in integrating ‘culture’ into your classroom.