

Teaching English as an international language: Cultural issues [2]

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Culture is a basic part of the linguistic aspects of language and language teaching. As McKay (2003) notes, culture is imbedded in and affects the semantic, pragmatic, and discourse levels of language learning and use.

Semantic issues

On the semantic level, culture is a part of many of the words and phrases of English. Consider, for example, big stick diplomacy, yellow journalism, and Uncle Tom, all of which are well-known US English phrases and frequently encountered in newspapers. Should such lexical phrases be taught?

One way to answer the question turns to the precepts of Smith (1976). If, as he contends, L2 speakers do not need to internalize the cultural norms of native speakers of the language, and further, if the international language becomes denationalized to an extent, there is clearly no need to teach such phrases in an English class. Thus, one central choice that teachers of English in Japan and elsewhere need to make is what lexical phrases should be included in a truly international English.

Pragmatic issues

On the pragmatic level, a related set of issues arises. Many current English textbooks give special attention to teaching appropriateness in language use. For example, some texts point out that when receiving a compliment, learners of English should acknowledge and accept the compliment with a simple response, such as "Thank you."

This, however, is clearly a culture-bound response. Research has revealed vast differences in how cultures respond to different speech acts. In white, middle-class American culture, a compliment is simply accepted. In other cultures, it is typical to downplay a compliment. This might lead to such speech acts as, "Oh no. I could have done better." Or "It was nothing."

If learners of international English do not need to internalize American or British or

Australian cultural norms, then there is no reason why a student of English needs to conform to the pragmatic rules of native English speakers. These insights into pragmatic issues have profound implications for us as teacher of English in Japan.

Discourse issues

The discourse level also raises a number of questions about the utility of English as an international language. The central point is that research in contrastive rhetoric has clearly shown that there are numerous differences, large and small, in the ways various cultures develop and deploy particular genres. For example, a business letter in Chinese is vastly different in structure and rhetoric from the same letter in English. Similarly, an argumentative essay in French stresses different rhetorical points than a similar essay would in English.

The question is, how far do learners of English as an international language need to internalize the discourse rules of native speakers of English. Entirely? Only to a degree? Not at all? What are our roles as teachers in responding to these issues?

In the semantic, pragmatic, and discourse issues raised above, we need to consider at least the language goals of the L2 speaker. We should also consider the intended audience: native speakers, members of the L1 community, people from other languages, or some combination of these possibilities. Thinking about these issues greatly clarifies, and complicates, the choices made in teaching English as an international language.

References

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