

Language and culture: Teaching methods and materials

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When teaching an international language such as English, teachers must consider the characteristics of such a language, the role culture plays in teaching, and language teaching in specific, the role language plays in the cultural expressions we make, and, the role the teaching materials and methods we use. These materials and methods, as McKay (2003) makes clear both have differing and important impacts of language acquisition.

Three basic types of materials can be used in language textbooks, according to Cortazzi and Jin (1999): source culture materials, target culture materials, and international materials.

The first is source cultural material. This draws on the learners' own culture as content. In the case of Japan, this would involve using mostly materials that are based on Japanese society and culture, and thus inherently familiar to the learners.

The second source of materials is from the target culture, drawing on the culture of a country in which English is spoken as an L1. In this case, students would spend most of their time reading and learning about life in native-English speaking countries, such as the United States, Great Britain, and Australia.

The third type is international target culture material, which uses a wide range of materials from a variety of cultures in English- and non-English-speaking countries around the world. For example, in this case, students in Japan might have a lesson in English in which the focus was deforestation of the rainforest in Brazil.

Source culture material is the primary emphasis on many existing English textbooks. However, one of the major goals of teaching English as an international language is to make it easier for learners to communicate their ideas and cultural understandings in the medium of English. That being the case, there are many reasons why source culture materials should be used. This is the general principle informing the selection of materials in *New Crown*.

Materials must be married to methods, which is another area of language teaching that reflects the perspective of each culture. Communicative language teaching (CLT) is one of the most popular teaching methodologies in

use today. It was first used largely in English speaking countries to help non-English speaking immigrants learn English and adjust to their new country. As a result, CLT emphasizes the importance of oral skills and group work and assumes the presence of a largely English social and cultural environment. Three factors are at work here which raise questions as to whether CLT is appropriate in other contexts.

The first is the assumption of a largely English environment. In most countries of the world, this is simply not the case. English is clearly a foreign language, and the extensive out-of-class English exposure can simply not occur.

The second is the related emphasis on oral skills. In some countries, such as Chile, China, and Korea, for example, the focus on speaking and listening may simply not be appropriate to the needs of learners. In these contexts, an emphasis on reading and writing skills might be better.

The third is the emphasis on group work. In some cultural contexts, this may be appropriate. In others, it may not, and may even prove counter-productive.

The point is, teachers must consider their particular context when selecting a methodology, not simply rely on the advice of experts with experience in another cultural context.

In short, English has become an international language, with all that involves in terms of culture, language, and teaching. This requires a serious rethinking of the links of English-speaking and non-English speaking countries. It requires recognition that, to a large extent, English has become denationalized. This means that teachers, at as local a level as possible, make decisions that are appropriate so that learners will be able to use English to tell others about their own culture.

References

- Cortazzi, M. & Jin, L. (1999). Cultural mirrors: materials and methods in the EFL classroom. In E. Hinkel (ed.), *Culture in second language teaching* (pp. 196-219). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- McKay, S.L. (2003). The cultural basis of teaching English as an international language. *TESOL Matters* 13 (4): 1,6.