

# The Language-Culture Connection in ELT: Theory and Practice

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## Abstract

*Defining the nature of the language-culture connection and proposing how that connection should be addressed in the language classroom have long been major issues in the ELT field, and these issues remain contested and largely unresolved to this day. This paper attempts to clarify some of the major ways that the language-culture connection is conceived of in the field, and it will also outline the influences that those conceptions may be having on both course content and language pedagogy. The writer argues that the ways in which the language-culture connection is theorized and put into practice needs to be better understood so program designers and teachers can make more informed choices about how they address it. The paper concludes with several recommendations about how to go about making those choices.*

## Introduction

... as language teachers we must acknowledge the inextricable link between language and culture in the language classroom (Crozet and Liddicoat 1997)

Few language teachers would disagree with the claim that language and culture are 'inextricably linked' or that it is important to acknowledge that link in the language classroom. However, just what the language-culture connection involves and exactly how it should be addressed remain contested issues (Block 2003). The major purpose of this paper is to offer a framework for understanding the major ways that the language-culture connection is conceived of in the ELT field. At the same time, I will also show that both course content and pedagogical approaches are typically associated with specific conceptions of the language-culture connection. In other words, the way that the language-culture connection is theorized has a predictable influence at the levels of curriculum design and classroom teaching.

This paper is a preliminary attempt at clarifying a long-standing controversy. No attempt is made to 'resolve' that controversy for the simple reason that the debate surrounding the language-culture connection is not of the kind that can or should be resolved. Rather than 'resolution,' this paper argues for the need to engage in an issue

that should be of major concern to everyone from curriculum planners to classroom teachers and, of course, to language learners as well. At the very least, I hope the paper will help in reexamining our conceptions of the language-culture connection to ensure that the way(s) of addressing it in the classroom are sufficiently informed and pedagogically justifiable.

## **1. Conceptions of the Language-Culture Connection in ELT**

A great deal of work in the ELT field has been devoted to arguing for the need to address the language-culture connection in the language classroom (recent examples include Crozet and Liddicoat 1997; Hall 2000; Hinkle 2001; Kramsch 1993 and 1998, and Valdez 1986).<sup>1)</sup> While some of these sources offer overviews of how the language-culture connection has been theorized and put into practice in the ELT classroom (see especially Crozet and Liddicoat 1997), many view the issue from a single perspective and argue for viewing the connection from that perspective (e.g. Byram et. al. 1998 and McKay 2001). In short, sufficient treatment of the complexities of the relationship between language and culture is lacking, meaning that our understanding of this important issue is incomplete. In this section, I attempt to account for some of the complexity. I will outline what I see as the six major theories of the language-culture connection found in the ELT field. A brief discussion of how these theories either directly influence or are indirectly reflected in curricular content and pedagogical approach is also included.<sup>2)</sup>

Briefly stated, I argue that the language-culture connection is viewed in the following ways:

1. Language is the tool that allows access to another culture
2. Language reflects the typical patterns of linguistic behavior of another culture
3. Language reflects the values, ideas, and beliefs of another culture
4. Language and culture are dialectically related and both shape and reflect ideological positions
5. Language learning involves the contact/collision of cultures
6. The connection of language with a specific culture should be severed

Several points need to be made before examining these theories in more detail. First, the above categories are an analytical convenience. In reality, more than one of these theories of the language-culture connection can — and most probably does — find expression in any given language program. However, it is also very likely that one theory gets privileged over the others. My primary purpose in offering this framework is not to argue for the merits of one theory over another. I only hope to point out

which theories end up being privileged and to help readers decide whether or not that privileged position is justified. To that end, some of the strengths and weaknesses of the various theories will be addressed throughout the paper. In addition, I hope to make explicit what the pedagogical consequences of holding a particular view of the language-culture connection may be. As should become clear very shortly, a number of pedagogical features tend to cluster around a given theory of the language-culture connection, and these features will be largely, though not completely, different from those associated with a different theory of the connection. Now, let's explore the framework briefly outlined above in more detail.

### **1.1 Language is the tool that allows access to another culture**

A longstanding rationale for learning a foreign language is that it allows access to a different culture or a 'different way of life.' In this view, language is a means to an end, the tool one needs to extract something of value from the target culture. There are three related but distinct aspects of the target culture that learners are thought to want to access: its 'cultural achievements,' its customs and values, and membership in its professional or academic communities.

#### **1.1.2 Cultural achievements**

Traditionally, a major purpose behind learning a foreign language has been to acquire the language skills needed to access valued written texts of the target culture (Crozet and Liddicoat 1997). While this has typically meant works in the literary canon, it can also include other texts related to the target culture's history, politics, religion, economics, medicine, and other fields.

More recently, ideas about what kinds of texts are thought to have value have expanded considerably. Instead of attempting to prepare learners to appreciate canonical works of literature or some other field, language teachers are now more likely to deal with such texts as Internet websites, song lyrics, movie reviews, and children's stories. Although interest has shifted in this way from the 'great works' to what are perceived as 'relevant' and 'authentic' texts, many teachers still view language as the tool learners need to negotiate their way through the texts that are believed to have special meaning in the target culture.

#### **1.1.3 Customs and values**

While some language programs focus on the textual artifacts of the target culture, many others follow a topic-based approach in which course content centers on increasing the learners' knowledge about various aspects of the target culture. Typical topics include the customs, holidays, festivals, important historical and cultural events,

and the (putative) national characteristics of people in the target culture.

#### **1.1.4 Membership in the target culture**

The final expression of the *language is a tool that allows access to another culture* theory can be found in programs that attempt to provide learners with the linguistic skills they need to gain entry into the target culture and/or survive once they are in it. Examples include test preparation courses (e.g. TOEFL and TOEIC) and English for Academic Purposes (EAP) or English for Occupational Purposes (EOP) courses. Although the ultimate goals of these courses differ, they all aim to help learners function in an academic or professional discourse community in the target culture.

### **1.2 Language reflects the typical patterns of linguistic behavior of the target culture**

Another common conception of the language-culture connection is that language is a 'reflection' or 'embodiment' of the typical patterns of linguistic behavior in the target culture. Rather than viewing language as the means to access the target culture, in this view language becomes the object of inquiry for what it can tell us about how, to paraphrase Austin (1975), 'things get done with words' in the target culture. This view obviously finds expression in the pragmatics-based strand of communicative language teaching (CLT) that focuses on how speech acts are realized in the target culture. In fact, an emphasis on improving the pragmatic competence of learners may be the most familiar and widely applied conception of the language-culture connection in the ELT field. As we will see later, however, it is not without its problems.

### **1.3 Language reflects the values, ideas, and beliefs of another culture**

This view of the language-culture connection sees language as reflecting a wide array of meanings that are significant in the target culture. Whereas a pragmatics-based approach focuses on the linguistic patterns of behavior (i.e. speech acts), this view examines how values, ideas, and beliefs are reflected in the language system, especially in the lexico-grammar. Although this theory has not had the impact of the previous two theories, investigation of the key words of cultures (e.g. Furstenberg 2003; Kramsch 2002; Wierzbicka 1991 and 1992), research on metaphor (e.g. Cameron and Low 1999; Lakoff 1989; McVeigh 1996), and research in discourse analysis, sociolinguistics, and the related fields of communication styles and textual organization (e.g. Holtgraves 2002; Maynard 1997; Spencer-Oatey 2000) are some of the research traditions whose findings can readily be adapted and applied in the language classroom.

#### **1.4 Language and culture are dialectically related and both shape and reflect ideological positions**

There are a number of researchers who focus on how the linguistic patterns of behavior and the values, ideas, and beliefs of the target culture both shape and reflect specific ideological positions. As opposed to the research mentioned in Sections 1.2 and 1.3, the perspective of those working in this tradition is critical. These researchers are primarily interested in uncovering how linguistic and cultural capital is used in the abuse of power, and they work towards rectifying the abuses they find. This stance is found especially in the fields of critical discourse analysis (e.g. Fairclough 1995), critical EAP (e.g. Benesch 2000 and Canarahajah 2001) and critical applied linguistics (Pennycook 2001), as well as in research in English as an International Language (e.g. McKay 2001 and Jenkins 2000). This kind of politically committed research is one of the liveliest fields in applied linguistics today, but the impact it has had in EFL settings is still limited.

#### **1.5 Language learning involves the contact/collision of cultures**

This conception of the language-culture connection involves an important shift in focus from those outlined before it. There are two major strands to this theory, and in one of them attention is shifted from the target culture to the 'culture of the classroom.' This research tradition has shown that the culture of learning that students bring with them into the classroom may clash with the expectations they find there (e.g. Canagarajah 1998 and 2002; Cortazzi and Jin 1998; Hall and Egginton 2000; Holliday 1994). In the other strand, the focus is placed on questioning the justifiability of expecting learners to adopt target culture norms of communicative and linguistic behavior. For example, Canagarajah (2001) examines the resistance of Tamil students in Sri Lanka to course content and teaching styles in their English L2 classrooms because of a lack of fit with their needs, expectations, and preferred learning styles. Many researchers in interlanguage pragmatics also question the expectation that some teachers have for learners to adopt target culture speech act norms (see LoCastro 2003 and several articles in Rose and Kaspar 2002), and many contrastive rhetoric researchers express similar doubts about making them adopt the rhetorical conventions of the target language discourse community (e.g. Kubota 1998 and Panetta 2001). The issue of the linguistic norms that learners are expected to aspire to will come up in a slightly different form immediately below.

#### **1.6 The connection of language with a specific culture should be severed**

Finally, a number of researchers argue for a fundamental reconception of the language-culture connection. They claim that because English has become a global

language it is unjustifiable to link it with one — or even several — target culture(s). There are three distinct strands of this conception of the language-culture connection. One can be seen in the ‘English for Global Issues’ movement, a topic-based approach to language teaching that argues that issues of global interest such as human rights, the environment, and peace studies should form the core of language programs.<sup>3)</sup> Another strand, mentioned briefly above, is in research in English as an International Language (e.g. Jenkins 2000 and McKay 2001). Researchers in this field argue that since many learners of English today are not interested in using the language with members of a specific inner-circle target culture, focusing on the values or beliefs of the target culture, its pragmatic norms, or the ability to approximate its sound system is no longer justifiable. Furthermore, those working in the ‘intercultural competence’ tradition (see Byram and Fleming 1998; Byram 2001 and Roberts et. al. 2001) echo the argument that learners should not be forced to approximate target culture norms or be exposed only to target culture texts, values, and knowledge. Instead, these researchers argue for training learners as ‘ethnographers of communication’ so they will develop a heightened awareness of and ability to deal with similarities and differences in L1 and L2 cultural values, beliefs, linguistic patterns of behavior, sound systems, and other aspects of the language system.

### 1.7 Summary

Before discussing some of the issues that this outline of the six major theories of the language-culture connection raises, it might help to view them from a slightly perspective by noting some of the metaphors that they rely on. As the ‘means to an end,’ ‘tool,’ and ‘extraction’ metaphors found in the *language is the tool that allows access to another culture* theory (Section 1.1) show, culture and language are viewed as fundamentally separate entities. Compare that with the ‘reflection’ metaphors in the next two theories mentioned, the *language reflects the typical patterns of linguistic behavior* theory and the *language reflects the values, ideas, and beliefs of another culture* theories (Sections 1.2 and 1.3). Here, we move towards an understanding of culture and language as being, to cite the quotation from the beginning of the paper, ‘intermingled,’ with culture being expressed through language. The emphasis shifts again in the *language and culture are dialectically related and both shape and reflect ideological positions* theory (Section 1.4), with the concept of ‘shaping’ adding a more dynamic and mutually constitutive element. The *language learning involves the contact/collision* theory (Section 1.5) involves still another perspective, as focus shifts from the target culture to either 1) the points of contact/friction between the L1 learning culture and the L2 teaching environment, or 2) the question of what norms and standards learners are encouraged — or forced — to follow. Finally, *the connection of language with a*

*specific culture should be severed* theory (Section 1.6) brings us back to a de-coupling of language from culture, but in a different way and for different purposes than the separation noted in the *language is the tool that allows access to another culture* theory (Section 1.1).

## 2. Discussion

Section 1 outlined the major theories of the language-culture connection found in the ELT field and briefly mentioned some of the research paradigms and pedagogical approaches that are associated with them. This section begins to examine the question of how program designers and classroom teachers can identify which theory — or theories — of the connection should find expression in the classroom. As suggested earlier, since it is unlikely that any language program will be built around any one single theory, the real question is what combination of theories should be involved. Ultimately, the balance that will be struck among the various theories will depend on a large number of context-specific factors, so it is neither possible nor appropriate to attempt to provide blanket solutions. However, in working towards a context-sensitive answer, we must first take a critical look at the theories — and the research paradigms and pedagogical approaches associated with them — to ensure that whatever choices are ultimately made are fully informed and justifiable. The discussion is limited to what I view as the three major issues that are in particular need of examination.

### 2.1 The concept of ‘target culture’

Although the term ‘target culture’ has been used throughout this paper, it is a highly controversial concept.<sup>4</sup> In the ELT field, the controversy centers on the question of which culture(s) will be viewed as the ‘target.’ The default choice has typically been one of two members of the inner circle, either America or Britain. Arguments for broadening our conception of which culture(s) should be viewed as the ‘target’ in language learning are well known (see especially Kachru 1985) and are based on two assertions. First, that to focus only on inner circle countries is to distort the fact that a large variety of Englishes exist and are used by large numbers of people. Second, that such a narrow focus does not adequately reflect students’ interests or needs. Many who learn English do not have a particular interest in the English-speaking cultures of the inner circle. In fact, as McKay (2001 and 2003) points out, many learners may be primarily concerned with being able to communicate about their own culture, not with learning about the culture of others.

## 2.2 Cultural content motivates learners

An assumption underlying most of the theories and pedagogical approaches mentioned in Section 1 is that cultural content — however that concept is understood — motivates learners. The *language allows access to another culture* perspective (Section 1.1) views culture as being an intrinsically motivating subject and assumes that learners will want to learn about the culture of the people who use the L2 or acquire the language skills needed to participate in the ‘target culture.’ The various *culture is reflected in language* perspectives (Sections 1.2, 1.3, and 1.4) assume that learners are motivated by the need to approximate ‘target culture’ norms. Problems with these two positions have already been mentioned. Even those who argue that *the connection between language and a specific target culture should be severed* (Section 1.6) view culture as a motivating force. In this view, the focus merely shifts to an interest in ‘global issues’ or to promoting learners’ ability to communicate about their own culture with other English speakers.

Of course it is extremely difficult to pinpoint the motives behind any learner’s attempt to learn a language. While some students may fit nicely into one of the categories mentioned immediately above, others may be driven by a combination of two or more of them.<sup>5)</sup> The point to keep in mind is that any program that assumes only one type of motivation will obviously fail to address the motivations of a number of learners.

## 2.3 Culture as knowledge vs. culture as a set of language skills

Another helpful way of categorizing the six theories mentioned in Section 1 is to distinguish between those based on introducing learners to a specific body of knowledge and those that try to equip them with a set of language skills. The skills-based view is a major strand in CLT. The emphasis on skills rather than knowledge can be traced to the context out of which this approach developed. CLT has largely defined itself in opposition to approaches that attempt to increase learner knowledge about the target language system (especially the grammar-translation method). Instead, it views its main responsibility as providing learners with the ability to use the target language for purposes of ‘real’ communication. This is the rationale behind some of the most popular and resilient syllabus types still found in ELT programs and materials — the situational and the notional-functional.

The other major strands of CLT are the topic-based and content-based syllabus, both of which move the focus from transactional uses of language to the ideational. These syllabuses often use information about an English speaking culture as the topic or content through which students learn the target language.

While it may be that language programs tend to favor a skills-based syllabus on the

one hand or either a topic-based or a content-based syllabus on the other, there are limitations to all of them. Skills-based syllabuses can be criticized for taking an excessively narrow view of language, and especially for being almost exclusively concerned with transactional uses of language. Another criticism, mentioned in Section 2.1, revolves around the justifiability of setting up the target language as a norm that students are expected to approximate. At the same time, content-based and task-based syllabuses that investigate some aspect of the 'target culture' run into the criticisms mentioned earlier about operating under simplistic and inaccurate views of 'culture' (Section 1.1.3), and for failing to address the needs of learners who are not motivated by a desire to learn about English-speaking cultures (Section 2.2). Another criticism has been leveled by Kramsch (1998) and others who view the 'cultural content' of many language courses to be little more than a collection of trivia that gives students only the most superficial view of the 'target culture.'

There is another perspective that mediates between the skills-based and knowledge-based dichotomy. Work being done in a number of different paradigms, especially in some versions of contrastive rhetoric (e.g. Panetta 2000), genre studies (e.g. Partridge 2001), EAP (e.g. Hyland 2000 and Canagarajah 2002), intercultural competence (e.g. Byram and Fleming 1998 and Roberts et. al. 2001), and some types of discourse analysis (e.g. Sarangi and Coulthard 2001) promotes raising learner awareness of the linguistic patterns, rhetorical organization preferences and communicative conventions of the target language. The work of these researchers makes a compelling argument for placing the language-culture relationship at the center of the ELT curriculum. It also argues for the importance of promoting an awareness of similarities and differences at all levels of the L1 and L2 linguistic systems to achieve a balance of knowledge about the L2 linguistic system and the acquisition of language skills needed to use it accurately and effectively for communicative purposes. The issue of what should constitute the core of the ELT curriculum is returned to in the following section.

### **3. Concluding remarks**

Before attempting to draw any 'conclusions,' I would like to focus first on some of the loose ends and unresolved issues that have come up throughout the paper. I will then offer some suggestions for improving the way that theories of the language-culture connection can be incorporated into language programs and individual language classrooms.

#### **3.1 Unresolved issues**

This short exploration of a complex topic leaves a number of important issues

unresolved. For one, I have limited myself to mentioning the research traditions that have had the greatest influence on ELT (e.g. contrastive rhetoric and pragmatics). It needs to be acknowledged that findings from other research traditions (e.g. conversation analysis) have also found their way into language classrooms; however, since they have not had the impact of work done in other areas, I have passed over them here. Clearly, a more detailed investigation into the contributions that various research traditions have had on theory and practice is needed.

Also, the way I have positioned some of the researchers within the six language-culture theories is admittedly (somewhat) arbitrary. For example, I have associated Kubota's work (e.g. 1998) in contrastive rhetoric with the *language learning involves the contact/collision of cultures* theory (see Section 1.5). Arguments can of course be made for including it in the category *language and culture are dialectically related and both shape and reflect ideological positions* (see Section 1.4). As mentioned in Section 1, the framework I am offering here is an analytical construct, and therefore misleadingly clear cut. Further investigation of the fuzzy boundaries and areas of overlap between categories is also needed.

### **3.2 Drawing conclusions: Striking a balance**

I claimed in Section 2.2 that it was not my purpose to argue for or against specific theories of the language-culture connection. This claim was not made out of the desire to be even-handed, but simply because I believe that there are convincing arguments to be made for giving all six theories expression in a language program. As mentioned in Section 2.3, the real issue is not which of the theories should be included or excluded; the question is what kind of balance to strike among them.

Also, when speaking of 'balance' I do not mean to imply that all the theories should be equally represented. Clearly, for reasons of practicality and principle, priorities must be established. If, for example, learners are primarily motivated by the desire for membership in the 'target culture,' program designers have a responsibility to adequately address that motivation. It is highly unlikely, of course, that learners will so conveniently share the same motivation, and one of the biggest challenges in curriculum design is to build a program that will satisfy the diverse needs and motivations of all learners (see Section 2.3).

It is equally important, however, that 'practical' needs are not the only factor that decides curricular content. Curriculum planners must ensure that their language program provides learners with a well-rounded language education. Returning to the example above, this would mean that learners who are motivated by the desire to get past a 'target culture' gatekeeper must get the proper language training, but that program designers must also see to it that they are provided with a broader language

education. (See Widdowson (1990) for mention of the difference between training and education).

### 3.3 Drawing conclusions: going forward

I have argued above that language programs should be built around a combination of the six theories of the language-culture connection, but that context-specific factors mean that the balance among the theories cannot be predetermined. While it may be impossible to offer specific recommendations, I believe there are four key considerations that have been brought up throughout the paper that should guide any decision about how the language-culture connection gets addressed in a language program.

First, the complexity of the language-culture connection must be recognized by curriculum planners and classroom teachers. This means that everyone involved must become more familiar with the various ways in which the connection is theorized, which entails becoming more aware of how the connection is viewed not only in ELT, but also in fields such as anthropology, linguistic anthropology, cultural studies, discourse analysis, and sociocultural and sociocognitive views of language acquisition and education. Unfortunately, many teachers view theory with suspicion, believing that it has nothing to offer — or even gets in the way of — the day to day business of language teaching. It is helpful to recall what Widdowson (quoted in Lewis 1993: 220) has to say about the need for teachers to have a firm understanding of theory as well as practice:

Teachers need to be given techniques, but they must also be educated to see those techniques as examples of certain theoretical principles and therefore subject to continual reappraisal and change. . . . If teachers are not educated in this sense, they cannot derive expertise from experience, they cannot act as mediators of ideas, either of their own or those of other people.

Although referring to the need for classroom teachers to be familiar with SLA theory, Widdowson's point applies with equal force to those who address the language-culture connection.

Second, teachers must make sure that the complexity of the language-culture connection is dealt with in the classroom. As suggested in Section 2.2, programs that operate according to only one (or a very limited number) of the theories of the connection are clearly inadequate. The same holds true about addressing the concept of culture itself. Students must come to understand the historically situated, contested, and contingent nature of the concept of culture and of the language-culture connection. Again, work done in EIL, intercultural competence, and the critical schools of discourse analysis, applied linguistics, and EAP offer detailed arguments for dealing with these differing concepts, and they also point to ways in which they can be dealt with in the language classroom.

Third, investigation into the various conceptions of the language-culture connection should be one of the guiding principles of all language programs. For one thing, such a focus provides programs with content that language teachers are qualified to teach, thereby avoiding the problem of having to go too far outside their own field of expertise.<sup>6)</sup> For another, focus on the language-culture connection makes it possible to provide learners not only with a specific body of knowledge, but also with the language skills needed to communicate effectively (see Section 2.3).

Finally, the language-culture connection should be investigated comparatively. That is, the object of study is not the target language and culture(s) as isolated phenomena, but a comparative investigation with the learners' own language and culture. Such an approach will help learners become more aware and informed users of language while helping them acquire the competence needed to move comfortably between languages and cultures. A more detailed exploration of the need for a comparative approach is found in the work of EIL researchers, as well as the traditions mentioned above: the critical schools of discourse analysis, applied linguistics, contrastive rhetoric and EAP, as well as in the area of intercultural competence.

Too often in the ELT field the importance of the language-culture connection has been agreed on without a real consideration of what that connection involves or how it should be addressed in the classroom. As I hope to have made clear, it involves a great many different perspectives that in turn entail a great many ways of addressing the connection. It is the responsibility of teachers and program designers to engage in an ongoing investigation of the language-culture connection and to make it one of the driving forces behind program design and classroom practice. The research traditions mentioned throughout this paper point the way towards workable solutions in answer to how the ELT profession should conceive of and address the language-culture connection in all its complexity.

### Notes

- 1) Crozet and Liddicoat's (1997) article was largely responsible for getting me to explore the language-culture connection in more detail. Their overview of how the language-culture connection has been conceived of in the ELT field traces three distinct trends: the traditional view of language as the tool students need to access various textual artifacts of the target culture (e.g. literary works, history, and political, social, and economic institutions); the emphasis on communicative competence, especially on speech act realization in the target culture; and, currently, an emphasis on improving cross-cultural understanding and awareness. While this three part scheme is useful — and there are obviously echoes of it in this paper — it is somewhat broad, and it fails to account for much of what goes on in the ELT classroom.
- 2) I am using the term “approach” inclusively to cover everything from the abstract, theoretical level (e.g. theories about language systems and how languages are learned) down to specific pedagogical activities and tasks. See Richards and Rogers (1986) for an argument for distinguishing among approach, method, and technique.
- 3) For a consideration of whether the issues examined and perspectives taken on them can truly be considered to be ‘global,’ see Ross (1999).
- 4) The term ‘target culture’ will continue to appear, but always within scare quotes to remind readers of the contested nature of the concept.
- 5) I will ignore the unmotivated student here. See Hinkel (1999) and Rose and Kaspar (2002) for mention of a type of student perhaps especially common in EFL settings where many study English simply to fulfill credit requirements.
- 6) Not surprisingly, the controversy of language teachers being responsible for teaching ‘unrelated’ content such as economics or law is a major concern in both ESP and EAP and is mentioned in Jordan (1997) and Dudley-Evans and St. John (1998).

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