

# Teaching How to Think about Culture in English Language Courses

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## Introduction

This paper explains perspectives and contexts of teaching culture in formal English courses to university students in Japan. Although teaching EFL is the predominant context in Japan, it is also possible for learners to study English as an International Language (EIL), which might also be referred to as English as a Global Language, English as a World Language, or simply World English(es). Such studies reflect the inclusive nature of varieties of English as opposed to limiting the exposure of learners to standard and/or preferred (inner circle) forms. A distinction can be made between EFL and EIL with the former introducing (linguistically comparative) lexico-grammatical structures perhaps within a notional functional approach to language learning. Teaching EIL can reinforce and expand the skills and functions of language beyond the pragmatic to analyse cultural practices, belief systems and communicative contexts beyond the level of individual interactions. This paper suggests that with detailed, sensitive planning, teachers of EFL, EIL and culture studies courses in English, can

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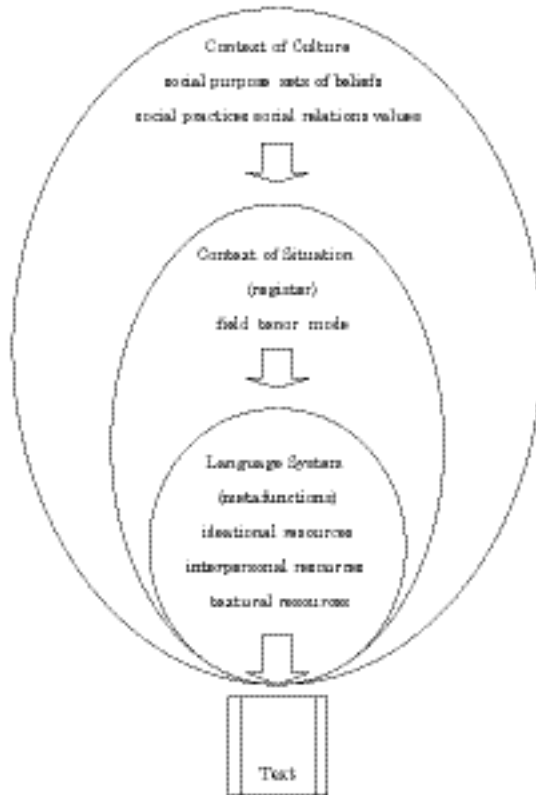
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promote more complex learner cognitive and also affective skills to allow them to more deeply understand other cultures and reflect upon their own. The complexity of thinking skills to promote learning outcomes is presented and exemplified and some pitfalls for teaching specific cultural content are outlined.

### **Language is culture**

The overview of Systemic Functional Grammar (SFG) by Halliday (in Burns & Coffin [eds.] 2001: 257) is derived from a broad context of culture, further refined to the context of situation where it presents in the features of genre and register and expressed within the accepted norms of a written or spoken language system. Figure 1 is adapted from Derewianka (in Burns and Coffin [eds.] 2001: 257). This visual representation of SFG is included, not to suggest its preference as a component of effective language teaching, but to show the perspective that language production always occurs within a broad or narrow context of culture; refer figure 1. If we accept this premise, then all subject content and associated learning materials must also have a cultural base that encompasses elements of an affective, linguistic spectrum. Culturally neutral topics could refer to (daily) routines that occur across cultures and other topics might involve moralistic, perhaps culturally sensitive analysis.

Figure 1: Halliday's Model of Systemic Functional Grammar.



Teaching EIL aims to increase intercultural communicative competence and Doye (in Gnutzmann [ed.] 1999: 96) explains that cultural studies can prepare learners for two contexts beyond the classroom. Both of these use English as the medium for communication, but the circumstances of interaction can differ. On one hand, learners might communicate with native English speakers, who will be using their first language. Alternatively, learners might communicate with non-native English speakers in

cultural environments where English is not prominent. Both of these situations are possible when Japanese communicate in English; either to native English speakers or with fellow Japanese or other non-native English speakers while conducting business, for example.

### **Aims of teaching cultural content**

We should assume that teachers of cultural studies, perhaps especially to non-native English speakers, possess the kind of interpersonal skills and experience to carefully consider affective course aims. As a pertinent starting point for planning, Zoreda (1997: 926) concurs with authors such as Kramersch (1993) and Hadley (1993) that processes of discovering C2 (a target culture) underscore the necessity of becoming aware of and evaluating one's own native prejudices, preferences and priorities for both teachers and students. In her extensive review, Schuerholz-Lehr (2007: 184) attempts to clarify the role and experience of educators. These include the factors of an instructor's personal/professional backgrounds and life experiences that have an influence on their cognitive framework as it relates to education for global awareness and intercultural competence. Furthermore, it includes the ways in which these backgrounds interact with a teacher's classroom practice regarding education for global awareness and cultural sensitivity and competence. A third factor is the extent to which targeted interventions, including professional development and study tours, are effective in changing an instructor's levels of intercultural competence and world-mindedness. Although many of the research findings presented are inconclusive, such perspectives remind us of the influence that teachers have in establishing contexts that can stimulate cultural frames of

reference for learners. It also raises the issue (as does Eoyang 2003) of whether teaching EIL/cultural studies means teaching internationalisation or globalisation.

When planning the content and types of course materials for English courses, language and culture are not viewed as mutually exclusive entities. There might be focus on particular macro skills, as when planning an ESP course. Moreover, the pragmatic and intrinsic value of learning English (EIL) through cultural studies can be generalised in the following broad aims of tertiary education. The components of intercultural sensitivity, cultural competence and world-mindedness are discussed by Schuerholz-Lehr (2007) and are extensions of the guiding principles of 'Global Education' by UNESCO (Classen-Bauer 1989 in Gnutzmann [ed.] 1999: 98).

#### *Respect*

- For teachers to treat learners as 'global citizens', future decision makers and responsible adults.
- To encourage learners to respect differences of opinion and variations in cultural beliefs and practices.

#### *Awareness*

- To increase learner awareness of culture as a dynamic and diverse entity within and beyond political borders.
- To consider how aspects of cultures are different but also how they are the same.
- To understand how various national and international issues are related and also Japan's role in the international community.

#### *Tolerance*

- To express opinions from a Japanese perspective while recognising the

views of other cultures.

- To break down cultural stereotypes.
- To accept that various cultural views may conflict and that no view is culturally superior.

### *Sensitivity*

- To learn how to communicate effectively and appropriately with people from other cultures.
- To increase empathy with people in differing cultural contexts.

### *Proficiency*

- To encourage more complex thinking skills in order to explore the significance of cultural issues in more detail.
- To develop cultural literacy utilizing all macro skills and also paralinguistic communicative competence.

## **Teaching a hierarchy of thinking skills**

Learning (or earning) language according to Eoyang (2003) does not involve the perception of language as a tool or a code, but as a dynamic cultural experience. Course planners and material developers need to be aware of the type of learner reflection that is necessary for establishing what Kramersch (1993) terms a 'sphere of interculturality' that is so essential to the use of EIL (McKay 2002: 82). The effective use of cultural materials does not simply motivate learners or present new lexical items and grammatical structures. Rather, one of the keys to learning is an examination of the cultural context of lesson materials and also the level of reasoning skills required for this. This perspective supports that of Halliday shown in figure 1, that language is formulated within culture, as

is naturally the case in L1. However, Doye (in Gnutzmann ed 1999) explains that linguistic competence extends from structural proficiency in L2 to cultural and intercultural communicative competence in C2. Achieved through cultural studies and world studies comparing and analysing cultures, he outlines and exemplifies teaching strategies for such courses. In the context of EIL, it is not necessarily what you say, but how and to whom according to target cultural norms. Potential weaknesses of this however, would be to present a limited context of such cultural norms or to treat these superficially.

A number of contexts for presenting source culture and international culture materials are shown in various combinations by McKay (2002). The constant of the contexts is the source culture student, in effect, any learner studying English as a foreign or second language. One of the variations of context is the cultural background of the teacher, which could be the same as that of the learners or from a foreign, target culture. Another variation is the type of learning materials that reflect either a source culture or an international culture; refer figure 2. According to the diagram, the source culture student could be Japanese with a target culture teacher a native English speaker from an inner circle country such as Australia, Canada, the UK or the USA. The international culture textbook might have a range of topics from one or a number of countries other than the source culture. It may or may not include material related directly to the country of the target culture teacher. However, this need not be perceived as a disadvantage for the teacher or learners because the focus of various macro skills will be on issues in a range of contexts and the key to learning should be the complexity of thinking skills that determine linguistic choices.

Figure 2: Teaching International Culture Materials. (McKay 2002: 92)



The research of Stapleton (2001) revealed that learners were much better able to write about culturally familiar topics than unfamiliar ones in terms of their personal experience (evidence) and general cultural awareness. Elements of critical thinking in writing samples included: arguments; pieces of evidence; opposite viewpoints recognized; refutations; fallacies; and references. The reader is directed to Appendix C of Stapleton's article for an outline of critical thinking assessment criteria based on linguistic structures. Importantly, beyond quantifying writing assessment by the inclusion of particular expressions, he believes that critical thinking entails the discovery, development and clarification of an argument and also the thinking processes involved (Ramage and Bean, 1999 in Stapleton 2001: 516). It is this latter aspect which remained vaguely defined in Stapleton's research and one which will be exemplified in the following section.

How learners can achieve a deeper understanding of culture is by developing affective and higher level thinking skills. Learners need to engage in this in order for any real appreciation of their own or another culture; refer figure 3. Bloom's 1956 taxonomy of educational objectives includes the affective domain. Furthermore in the cognitive domain, are the



skills (in ascending difficulty/complexity) of knowledge, comprehension, application, analysis, synthesis, and evaluation. For sample question types, refer to: <http://www.officeport.com/edu/bloomq.htm> and for a more detailed chart with examples, see: <http://www.stemnet.nf.ca/grassroots/blooms.html>. The original hierarchy of cognitive skills has been modified to: remember, understand and apply, with the most complex skills shown together: analyse, evaluate, and create. For general reference to the revised taxonomy (2001), including the affective domain, refer to: [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Taxonomy\\_of\\_Educational\\_Objectives](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Taxonomy_of_Educational_Objectives). Loosely based on Bloom's taxonomy, figure 3 depicts a matrix of various cognitive skills and also the spheres within which topics can be explored.

Figure 3: Thinking Skills and Context of Topics.

More complex thinking	personal	interpersonal	rational	irrational
Hypothesize				
Evaluate				
Speculate				
Compare and contrast				
Describe				
Identify / list				
Less complex thinking				

The personal sphere relates to the individual, with topics and questions about an individual's opinions, experience, preferences and routines, for example. Everyday conversation topics feature at this level, including free time, television, fashion, movies, study, art, fads, pets, part time jobs, sport and food.

Interpersonal: the individual and society. Topics and questions are

related to the preferences and routines of an individual's family and friends, such as travel, jobs, and events such as festivals, birthdays, New Year, weddings, funerals, parties and coming of age.

National: Topics and questions are related generally to (Japanese) education, law, finance, transport, environment, natural resources, technology, medicine, history and natural hazards, customs, holidays, lifestyle, heritage, industries and news/current affairs.

International: Japan's role in the world. Topics and questions relating to (Japanese) trade, economy, foreign aid, world heritage sites, treaties, international space station/exploration, how Japan perceives other countries and how other countries perceive Japan.

Following are examples of questions for the cognitive skills shown in figure 3. These specifically relate to the cultural topics; television, travel, environment, natural hazards, and foreign aid.

- |             |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                    |
|-------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Hypothesize | If television didn't exist, what kind of entertainment would be popular?<br>Without travel, how could we learn about other cultures?<br>How could extra tax by the government help the environment?<br>What would happen if we could predict earthquakes?<br>How could poor countries develop without foreign aid? |
| Evaluate    | How successful is television as a source of education?<br>How important is domestic travel for Japan's economy?                                                                                                                                                                                                    |

- How does recycling help the environment?
- How well does the government help people when there is a disaster?
- How useful is foreign aid?
- Speculate      What do you think television will be like in the future?
- In what ways do you think transport will change?
- Why does Japan have environmental problems?
- How can the study of earthquakes save lives?
- What kinds of foreign aid will Japan provide in the future?
- Compare and      Do you think that watching television is better than  
contrast          reading a book? Why?
- How is travel different now compared to thirty years ago?
- Does Japan have more or less environmental problems than other countries?
- Compare the 2008 earthquake in China with the Hanshin earthquake in 1995.
- Is it better for governments or NGOs to provide foreign aid? Why?
- Describe         What is a popular type of television show?
- What types of places are popular for travellers in Japan?
- How does (environmental problem) effect Japan?
- How do people prepare for a typhoon?

What kind of foreign aid does Japan provide to other countries?

Identify / list Which television shows do you watch?

Where is a popular place to travel in Japan?

Natural hazards in Japan - when, where, how often do they happen?

What are some environmental problems in the world?

Which countries does Japan provide foreign aid to?

The following examples show the cognitive skill and also the possible context of the topics; public transport and free time.

Hypothesize How do you think a tax on driving in the city would affect public transport? (national)

Evaluate How efficient is the public transport in your area? (personal)

Speculate How do you think public transport can be improved in your area? (personal)

How is public transport in Japan different from that in (country)? (international)

Compare What are the advantages and disadvantages of public transport? (national)

Is the bus or train service better where you live? (personal)

Describe What do you think is the most convenient type of transport? (personal)

Identify / list What sorts of public transport are there where you live? (personal)

Hypothesize What do you think might happen if people had less free time

- (personal)
- Evaluate Do you agree that free time is associated with good health?  
(personal)
- Speculate Why do you think that free time is necessary? (personal)
- Compare How is the way Japanese spend their free time these days  
different to 30 years ago? (national)
- Describe How do most Japanese spend their free time? (national)
- Identify / list What do you do in your free time? (personal)

The following examples show how topics can be presented with a grammatical focus. It is worth noting how thinking requires knowledge of one's own culture. Furthermore, comparing and contrasting might involve C1 only or also C2. Thinking about the future requires imagination and higher level cognitive skills, as potential scenarios might not be based on current circumstances.

Talking about the past:

How was Japanese food different 50 years ago? (national/compare and contrast)

How did people communicate before there were mobile phones?  
(interpersonal/describe)

How did people travel 100 years ago? (international/describe)

How did people get news before there was television? (international/describe)

What were some popular types of entertainment in Japan many years ago? (national/identify)

Trends from the past until now:

How has transport changed in Japan since the 1960s?

(national/compare and contrast)

What types of entertainment have become more popular recently?

(interpersonal/describe)

What places have become popular for Japanese to visit overseas in the last twenty years? (international/compare and contrast)

How has the lifestyle in Japan changed most in the last ten years?

(national/compare and contrast)

What kinds of movies have become popular in the last ten years?

(personal/compare and contrast)

Talking about the present:

What do you think is the biggest environmental problem in Japan?

(national/identify)

What do Japanese usually do at New Year? (national/describe)

What are some kinds of things we can recycle? (national/identify)

How do people usually dress for a wedding? (national/describe)

How do most people get their news these days? (national/identify)

Talking about the future:

How do you think transport will change in the next 20 years? (international/speculate)

What do you think will happen if Japan's birth rate remains low?

(national/hypothesize)

What kinds of television shows do you think we'll watch in the future?

(national/speculate)

What will happen in Japan if the price of oil continues to increase?

(national/hypothesize)

Do you think that Japan will win the World Cup soccer competition in

the future? Why? (personal/speculate)

## **Cultural themes**

Topics presented don't always have to be controversial or relate to problems. Examples shown here should not be considered neatly compartmentalised topics to be completed within one lesson. This is mentioned further in the pitfalls of teaching cultural content. Topics could include marriage customs, giving presents, holidays and travel, Hollywood vs. Bollywood, and the development of alternative energy sources and biofuels. Comparative cultural studies can be based on contemporary or historical themes such as trade, immigration, language change, Christmas customs and animation. Themes can be studied according to the type of macro skills specified in a course title or those that teachers (or students) want to develop. Everyday routines and preferences can feature as long as the thinking skills that accompany these elicit more linguistically complex responses within the context of a topic studied in more detail.

Despite course titles limited to 'reading' or 'speaking', effective learning of culture cannot depend on micro-managing macro skills with content treated in isolation lesson to lesson. Although it is, unfortunate that teaching ESP courses such as TOEIC test preparation allows limited scope for teaching cultural themes, the IELTS test offers learners a much greater opportunity for this through the chance for learners to offer opinions and interpretation of question content. Therefore, the practice of higher level cognitive skills might also benefit pragmatic courses such as test preparation.

## **Pitfalls of teaching cultural content**

Level of thinking complexity: This can be a difficult and time-consuming process. Learners might grapple with just a few ideas and require extensive linguistic support, such as clear examples and model structures. Learners must also have a clear understanding of the nature of any task.

Cultural sensitivity: Whether certain topics should be discussed and if so, from which/whose perspective needs to be considered. Although teachers might aim to break down cultural stereotypes, more pervasive cultural influences beyond the classroom might serve reinforce these.

Learner rhetoric: Perhaps as a strategy, learners might produce the information they think teachers want to hear. They might not provide supporting ideas and also pay lip service to issues. Expect more than overgeneralisations such as 'There are many problems. We should solve them now' as this does nothing to demonstrate the aims of (inter)cultural understanding.

Time / exposure to language: Logistically, teachers have limited in class time to present and discuss issues. Learners should read information from various, ideally primary sources, including newspapers and the internet to prepare, consolidate or compliment content covered in class.

Perceived learner difficulties are rooted in ignorance, requiring them to 'think outside the box' to comprehend issues from a much broader perspective. There is the potential that learners may feel confronted by certain issues and some viewpoints might take them beyond their cultural comfort zone. They should never feel as though they are viewed negatively as a member of a particular (sub)cultural group. Teachers should provide



materials that do not inflame issues, and focus on a broader understanding by sensitively presenting alternative views.

Here are five suggested difficulties in teaching cultural studies:

1. Cultural denial: other cultures have problem  $x$ , but ours doesn't. This might relate to social issues including HIV/AIDS, domestic violence, or to environmental issues, corruption and scandals.
2. Cultural avoidance: other cultures have problem  $x$  but our culture has no bad influence like that at all.

Regarding deforestation in other countries: Why are the trees cut down? Who buys the timber? Which countries have logging companies operating there? Another example might be the global food crisis and the growing of food to create biofuels. Within a culture, there can be the belief that individuals cannot solve problems or that established norms and practices cannot be changed. For example considering the status of women, there might be an erroneous perception that women *cannot* be professionals.

3. Cultural arrogance: other cultures are not as advanced as ours or our culture is better than others.

The theme of nationalism could be studied, including its positive and negative effects with contemporary or historical comparisons. Examples of cultural arrogance are that other contexts are irrationally assumed to have worse public safety and the people considered with suspicion and inferiority.

4. Cultural indemnity: to acknowledge liability for problems and taking action via policies and laws to redress these. Topics could be: Minamata disease, 'stolen generation' of Aboriginal children in Australia, internment of Japanese US citizens during World War 2, whaling in a declared marine

sanctuary, deforestation in various countries, air pollution (dioxins), smoking, issues relating to citizenship and to various forms of discrimination.

5. Cultural package: a topic cannot be comprehensively covered in just one lesson. Issues that are neatly compartmentalised and overgeneralised risk trivializing learning outcomes. Different types of activities and associated thinking skills should be a part of lesson sequences with topics presented so that learners can see how these are related. There is no surprise that many teachers have resorted to the infamous "cultural capsule" to spoon out in measureable quantities the cultural component in the curriculum (Gallway 1992 in Zoreda 1997: 925).

Further to this, Hadley (1993: 360) is critical of four teaching approaches that have developed from a fragmented conceptualisation of culture, exemplified here in a Japanese context. The common deficiencies of these approaches seem to be their superficiality and incongruity.

1. The Frankenstein Approach: A geisha from here, a temple from there, a karaoke bar from here, a hot spring from there.
2. The Four-F Approach: Folk dances, festivals, fairs and food.
3. The Tour Guide Approach: The identification of geographical features such as mountains, rivers and cities.
4. The "By-the-Way" Approach: Promoting an "Us and Them" mentality with sporadic lectures or bits of behavior selected indiscriminately to emphasize sharp differences.

## **Conclusion**

This paper has shown that teaching specific culture related content

with English as the medium for communication, can be achieved by encouraging learners to use more complex cognitive skills. This should also be planned with careful attention to affective learner outcomes. If this combination is successful, learners can more than simply describe, compare and analyse aspects of culture. They will have consciously and actively engaged in a greater understanding of their own culture and ideally, that of others in a personal and meaningful way. Furthermore, they will have practiced the locating and processing of cultural content to communicate their opinions in English. It is worth being cautious that not all course aims or learning outcomes might be achieved due to some of the pitfalls described. However, this should not deter educators from presenting any number of cultural topics in a variety of course types. Learners themselves can be part of the decision making for the topics they study. It is a final suggestion that learner outcomes might not be the criteria for assessment, but the quality of processes of analysing and appreciating culture that decides the success of an individual's learning and their course of study. For a learner to be able to communicate in another language what aspects of culture mean to them and why they are important is of no minor educational significance and this more than justifies the teaching of focused cultural topics within a second language curriculum.

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