

Using New Literatures as a Resource in Fostering Cross-cultural Awareness

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ABSTRACT

This paper is based on the premise that the wealth of new literatures in English that are available in several countries of Asia and South East Asia today can serve not only to provide students access to the rich and varied cultural life of the people in these settings, but also help develop in them sensitivity and empathy towards other cultures. Given that English no longer belongs to any one nation or culture, and is increasingly being used in numerous multilingual and multicultural settings worldwide, it is fast becoming 're-nationalised' (McKay 2000), as it takes on new cultural associations, experiences and values. In teaching English as an international language (EIL), therefore, it no longer makes sense to place an exclusive focus on target culture knowledge alone. The paper makes a strong case for including other cultural materials, especially those from Asian and South East Asian literature, in the selection of content and topics for textbooks constructed for use in EFL/ESL contexts, with a particular focus on fostering cross-cultural tolerance and understanding, a neglected area in ELT. Further, the paper goes on to illustrate how texts from these new literatures may be used in promoting cross-cultural understanding in the language classroom.

Only recently has cross-cultural understanding begun to receive the kind of attention it deserves in the realm of EFL and ESL teaching/learning. Indeed, for a long time culture itself was considered peripheral, or at best, no more than a supplementary diversion (Tseng, 2002) to the teaching and learning of language, although cross-cultural variation has continued to be a live and productive topic of study in sociolinguistic and pragmatic research.

Even where cultural aspects of language study have been addressed in EFL/ESL, traditionally this has pertained exclusively to target language culture. Given the insight that language and culture are inseparable, and that therefore, to teach language is to teach culture, the belief prevailed that in order to gain full competence in the language learners of English in different parts of the world need to internalize the cultural norms of native speakers of English – that is, speakers of English from the Inner Circle (Kachru, 1989) or BANA (namely, British, Australasian and North American) countries (Holliday, 1994).

The drawbacks of such an approach are many, as have come to be acknowledged by the ELT community (see, for instance, McKay, 2002). Consequently, many of the assumptions underlying such an approach are being seriously questioned. For instance:

1. Is it reasonable to assume that the purpose of EFL/ESL teaching is to impart the cultural norms of native speakers of the target language, especially in the case of English, whose ownership has become de-nationalised as a result of its recent spread as an international language (EIL)? In many parts of the world, where English is learned as a lingua franca

and used as an additional language in very specific domains and for very specific purposes in largely multilingual settings, the cultural norms of the target language may be irrelevant. Consequently, students may be unable to relate to or identify with much of it.

2. Is it realistic to assume that EFL/ESL teachers in various parts of the world are knowledgeable about the culture(s) of Inner Circle countries? Many of these teachers, particularly in less developed countries, are placed in a weaker position owing to their inadequate knowledge of the cultures of Inner circle/BANA countries. The expectation that they should have cultural knowledge of these countries commensurate with those of native speakers, or native speaker teachers, can breed a sense of inferiority, in addition to the insecurity they already experience about their linguistic competence.
3. Given the international nature of the language and the increasingly bilingual nature of its speakers in the contemporary world, would not an exclusive focus on native language culture be rather limiting? Even if teachers were knowledgeable about the culture(s) of Inner circle countries, both teachers and learners will be served with a limited worldview if that is the only cultural knowledge they are oriented to in the language classroom, especially since many of the Inner circle countries propound a monolingual and monocultural ethos. This could be impoverishing for students who live and learn English in rich and varied multicultural and multilingual settings. It could breed in learners an unhealthy mindset that refuses to be open to other cultures, more so when combined with feelings of cultural superiority (imbibed elitism) that the knowledge of English tends to carry with it vis-à-vis the local languages and cultures.
4. In addition to promoting homogenization, would it not lead to marginalizing the values, beliefs and knowledge systems associated with the learners' own culture? The 'culture of inferiority' does not refer only to the question of language use. It extends to various dimensions of the classroom, including textbooks and other materials used for language learning. In these texts, certain ideas, behaviours and products (especially those of the West) are privileged, while those of the learners themselves are frowned upon or downplayed. The psychological impact of this culture of inferiority can sometimes be disastrous when it leads learners to actually believing that there is indeed something 'wrong' with their own culture.
5. Finally, if the focus is exclusively on target culture knowledge where is space for students to talk about their own culture? It is reasonable to suppose that for many ESL/EFL learners of English talking about their own culture, reflecting on it, and representing and interpreting it to speakers of other cultures might be the real, if not the only, reason why they might wish to learn the language. The unidirectional flow of culture and expertise – via books, textbooks, research findings that come through the transfer of technology from BANA contexts – breed a culture of dependence rather than autonomy, that is ironically at cross-purposes with the very ideas of learner choice, self-regulation and independence that form the crux of much Western educational philosophy.

Yet nowhere has the dominance of target culture norms been more conspicuously manifested than in the textbooks and teaching materials used in EFL/ESL teaching-learning contexts worldwide. Several scholars have pointed out to the shortcomings of the plethora of global textbooks currently available in the market, critiquing them not

only for being far removed from learners' own lives, but for providing them with a single monochrome view of the world that is both unrealistic and undesirable.

A critique of these global textbooks reveals the following inadequacies:

- a. They tend to be predominantly anglocentric (Prodromou, 1988; Alptekin, 1993), presenting the complexity of the world within a simplified western framework (Pennycook, 1994). They are thus experientially at odds with the students' local cultures and involve little scope for cultural comparison or reflection (Alam, 2002).
- b. The process of internationalization and its attendant one-size-fits-all philosophy has led to the loss of contextual specificity, so that textbooks have begun to resemble each other, not only in terms of design but also in their content and choice of topics (Gray, 2002).
- c. In their attempt to avoid being offensive to minority groups and in order to appear politically correct, the treatment of content often ends up being bland, sanitized and vacuous.
- d. They reflect the preoccupations of a largely middle-class, youthful, urban population (Risager, 1991), featuring popular Western icons and flaunting the lifestyles and interests of movies, sports and pop idols, thus resulting in the trivialization of thematic content and its treatment.
- e. They are often characterised by an over-emphasis on functional English texts, mainly transactional in nature, restricting communication to a narrow parochial discourse characterized by language use in immediate, utilitarian contexts (Wallace, 2002).
- f. Often, the choice of texts is neither stimulating nor thought-provoking, lacking in key ingredients such as imagination and humour. Hence they are often found to be dull and uninteresting (Alam, 2002).
- g. There is little scope for generating interaction with the learners' history or culture, or for engaging their minds with social, moral or philosophical problems. There is little to develop in students a critical consciousness or serve broader educational aims such as creating cross-cultural understanding (Alam, 2002).

This is not to say that all global textbooks are deficient, or that knowledge of target language culture is entirely unnecessary for learners of EIL. The aim of this paper is not to attack target culture norms, but to make a case in favour of exposing learners to a broader range and diversity of cultures. It does contend that an exclusive focus on any one culture as the preferred choice could actually be detrimental to learners and could have an insidious influence on them, especially if they are at an impressionable stage of their learning. As Benthahila and Davies comment:

The goal . . . should be to develop the learner's awareness of the existence of the cultural component in language use, and the way this may differ from one society to another. In teaching a foreign language, we should by all means provide information about the way its native speakers tend to interact and organize their discourse; but rather than presenting these patterns as an ideal which our students

should copy, we should present them as alternative ways of using language, neither more nor less logical, sophisticated or desirable than the ways the learners are already familiar with.

.... The aim should be to provide the learners with as much knowledge as is practicable about the native speaker's norms, but without suggesting that these are the only valid way of using the target language, so that they may be equipped to make an informed choice as to whether to conform to native speaker patterns, maintain those of their own culture, or adopt some sort of compromise, and indeed to make different choices according to the different situations in which they find themselves.

Bentahila and Davies, 1989, pp. 110-111

Increasingly, our learners will be global citizens of a future, hopefully better, world; in this world they need to survive successfully in international and national cultures. They need to be able to occupy a comfortable middle ground based on the concept of global appropriacy and local appropriation (Alptekin, 2002; Holliday, 1994; Kramsch, 1993, 1998). Thus there is a real need to teach international communication as a form of intercultural communication.

Many scholars (Alptekin, 2002; Byram 1995; Cortazzi and Jinn, 1999; Kramsch 1993, 1998; McKay 2002) have challenged the validity of imposing a uniform native speaker model, as traditionally characterized by the notion of communicative competence (Canale and Swain, 1980), on the heterogeneous contexts in which English is now being used around the world. There is a growing consensus regarding the need to extend the concept of communicative competence to include aspects of intercultural competence in developing a more realistic model for EIL.

Responding to such a need, Cortazzi and Jinn (1999) discuss the advantages of introducing both *source culture materials*, that draw on the learner's own culture as content, and what they call *international target culture materials*, that is, materials that use a great variety of cultures in English- and Non English-speaking countries around the world. It is this last mentioned aspect of teaching materials that is the central concern of this paper.

Such materials could have several benefits, precisely because they would contain texts in which bilingual users of English interact with other speakers of English in cross-cultural encounters for a variety of purposes. In addition to providing examples of lexical, grammatical, and phonological variation as they occur in bilingual speech in local contexts, they could also illustrate instances of cross-cultural pragmatics in which bilingual users of English draw on their own rules of appropriateness. As McKay puts it, "They could then provide a basis for students to gain a fuller understanding of how English today serves a great variety of international purposes in a broad range of contexts thus encouraging students to reflect on their own local and global uses of EIL" (McKay, 2002, p. 93).

I argue that the new literatures in English, which are currently available in great abundance in countries such as India, Singapore, Nigeria, Sri Lanka and the Philippines,

constitute prime examples of such international target culture materials. They admirably exhibit these features that give readers many valuable insights into the behaviour of people living in other cultures. They could have immeasurable value as a resource for raising cross-cultural awareness and promoting cross-cultural understanding, not only between native and non-native speakers of English, but among bilingual speakers of English from diverse contexts and cultural settings around the world.

From this viewpoint, Maley's (1989, p. 12) and Duff and Maley's (1990, p. 6) arguments in favour of the use of literature for language learning also applies to the use of the new literatures, not just as a resource for language learning but in opening up a greater sense of different cultures and of the universality of human experience in the midst of difference. These include:

Universality across cultures

The themes literature deals with are common to all cultures, though the treatment of them may be different: Death, Love, Separation, Belief, Nature – are all familiar to us no matter which culture we come from. Even the genres, conventions and devices employed by literature are common across cultures. In the case of new literatures, although they involve learning about human beings from other cultures, their values, norms, problems – all of which may be unfamiliar and new to us – they do convey the feeling that there is a common basis for human experiences.

Literature builds and develops students' motivation and interest

Literary texts are non-trivial because they deal with themes which concern the writers enough to want to write about them. As Duff and Maley (1990, p. 6) claim, literary text are unlike many other forms of language teaching inputs, which “frequently trivialize experience in the service of pedagogy”. They have a ‘genuine feel’ which can be a powerful motivator, especially when they touch on themes to which learners can bring a personal response from their own experience.

Personal education and cultural enrichment

Reading literature is believed to help students to read the world and become better individuals in society (McRae 1991, pp. 19-20, Carter and Long 1991: 3). Literature deals with ideas, things, sensations and events which readers can relate to in their own life experiences or enter into imaginatively. If students can be exposed to experiences of another culture and can imaginatively identify themselves with the characters they read about, this can create feelings of empathy, tolerance, respect, and even admiration.

Literature broadens students' language awareness

Literary texts contain genuine samples of a very wide range of styles, registers, and text types at many levels of difficulty, so that for this reason alone they are worthy of consideration. In addition to offering a far richer repertoire of language use than the limited fare offered by functional English, if the texts also contain samples of non-native varieties of English, such as Indian English or Singapore or Malaysian English, they would reflect language use that is far more authentic in terms of the contexts in which English is used..

Literature offers personal enjoyment and emotional gain

Literature deals with themes and topics which are intrinsically interesting, being part of the human experience, and treats them in ways designed to engage the readers' attention. A fundamental weakness of many functional and transactional texts is precisely that they lack the narrative tension that makes the reading of literary texts so gripping and emotionally satisfying for the reader. Literature can make people react personally to "other people's ways of seeing things" and can engage both their intellect and emotions.

Literature develops interpretative skills

Because of its highly suggestive and associative nature, literary texts convey different meanings to different people and are open to many interpretations. As Maley points out, "the very fact that no two readers will have a totally convergent interpretation sets up the tension necessary for a genuine exchange of ideas." (Maley, 1989, pp.12-13). It follows that the 'opinion gap' allows learners much more scope to exercise their creative and critical thinking skills, to make comparisons, reflect upon, interpret, and draw individual, even original, conclusions. And in the case of the new literatures, more opportunities for constructive cross-cultural interpretation and comparison.

Arguably, where the materials reflect not only the learners' own culture but a specific variety of English as well, this can work positively to support perceptions of self-identity and serve an integrative goal in language pedagogy as learners gain a firmer sense of self in their own society (Talib, 1992). This can go a long way toward empowering students to use English with greater confidence, and ultimately to articulate and maintain their own 'voice' through the second/foreign language.

Exploring ways of using the new literatures

The assumption underlying the discussion so far has been that the English language has splintered into several regional varieties given that speakers of English as an additional language or lingua franca comprise linguistically, ethnically and culturally heterogeneous groups, thus expanding the ownership of English. (Widdowson, 1994). As these speakers employ English to communicate with one another with increasing creativity and confidence, each with their distinct set of linguistic and sociolinguistic norms, there is likelihood for miscommunication to occur arising from cross-cultural differences. How then can the new literatures be used as a resource for sensitizing learners to these issues?

Both experience and research has shown that because different cultural groups subscribe to different sets of assumptions, beliefs and values, they tend to hold different sets of expectations with regard to the linguistic and sociopragmatic norms that govern behaviour. Cross-cultural encounters in which such norms and expectations are violated can easily result in misunderstandings and miscommunication. Our students must therefore have the ability "to use their linguistic competence and their sociolinguistic awareness of the relationship between language use and context to manage interaction across cultural boundaries". Developing intercultural competence means the ability to anticipate misunderstandings and the capacity "to cope with the affective as well as cognitive demands of engagement with otherness" (Byram 1995, p. 25).

The new literatures offer ample instances of ‘naturally occurring’ critical incidents which arise in cross-cultural encounters, representing ‘unexpected’ or ‘unpredictable’ behaviours that result from differences in interpreting or responding to such cultural norms. These often illustrate how exposure to a foreign culture can sometimes create a negative impact, such as irritability, tension, or even hostility, termed in the literature as *culture bumps*, *culture shock* and *the violation of sociopragmatic rules*. If students are allowed a window to indirectly experience these tensions, and a sense of how they are *lived through* by the characters in the literary texts they read, by grappling with these tensions critically and reflectively, they can be helped to acquire a perception (or ‘apprehension’, as Kolb (1984) puts it) of what it is like to go through such experiences. In this way they *discover* and come to *gain insights* about the causes and consequences of such tensions and how to deal with them in cognitively and affectively appropriate ways.

As has been pointed out, what cultural content to include is only part of the issue. Equally important is *how* to deal with this content in a particular context. Obviously, it is not enough to raise awareness of other cultures merely through a transfer of information. Students should be asked to consider their own culture in relation to the one(s) they encounter and to reflect on the differences so that they become aware of their cultural lenses. This will help them to suspend their judgement until they have an adequate understanding of the situation. Tolerance of other cultures grows more readily as they come to appreciate that diversity exists both *between* and *within* all cultures including their own.

The more they become aware of cultural differences, the less likely they will be to make hasty pre-judgements, and the more open toward accepting alternative perspectives, seeing their interpretations as preliminary theories. Students are then likely to move from an initially biased judgemental stage where people from different cultures are ‘other-ed’ just because they are different, to one that involves greater tolerance and understanding of the other, and finally, to a stage of greater self-understanding. They gradually develop a level of objectivity as they come to realize the cultural relativity of what they believed to be normal or natural.

The following are some ideas for using literary texts in fostering intercultural awareness:

In Text 1, the narrator and her American boyfriend Rich are having dinner with her (Chinese) family. People from different cultures want to be polite, but cultures differ in the actual ways they realize and judge politeness. It is widely accepted that to show modesty is to be polite. But the extent to which this maxim is adhered to in the different cultures represented here (American and Chinese) varies greatly. Questions that invite cultural comparisons can be especially stimulating for discussion purposes as most students are interested in how their culture differs from another one:

This is a good example of a culture bump. Critical incidents of this kind which arise out of a mismatch of expectations can have a cultural resonance for students if we ask them to reflect on similar instances from their own experiences.

Text 1

But the worst was when Rich criticised my mother's cooking, and he didn't even know what he had done. As is the Chinese cook's custom, my mother always made disparaging remarks about her own cooking. That night she chose to direct it towards her famous steamed pork and preserved vegetable dish, which she always served with special pride.

'Ai! This dish not salty enough, no flavour,' she complained, after tasting a small bite. 'It's too bad to eat.'

This was our family's cue to eat some and proclaim it the best she had ever made. But before we could do so, Rich said, 'You know, all it needs is a little soy sauce.' And he proceeded to pour a riverful of the salty black stuff on the platter, right before my mother's horrified eyes.

Amy Tan, *Joy Luck Club* (1989, p. 173)

Activities for the *Joy Luck Club* text

Students can be asked to reflect on how the responses made by Rich and those expected of the narrator's family members were basically different because of their different expectations and assumptions; how societies that set a high value on humility and interpersonal relationships would interpret Rich's behaviour as 'rude' while the society he comes from might look upon the responses that typify the narrator's culture as being 'not quite truthful'.

1. As you read: What are the unwritten rules of hospitality in Amy Tan's culture? Are there similar rules of hospitality in your culture?

2. As you read: How would you have responded if you were Rich? What is the polite thing to do in your culture?

3. After you read: Imagine you are one of the family members at the dinner. How would you go about setting things right after Rich unknowingly did the 'wrong' thing in this instance?

4. After you read: What do foreigners in your country find the hardest things to adjust to?

5. After you read: What things about foreigners you know irritate you the most? Why do you think this happens?

Cultural understanding – manifested through various traits such as empathy, respect, flexibility, openness, and tolerance of ambiguity - can be worked out with texts that represent totally new cultural experiences, if students can be encouraged to invest appropriate skills of reflection and interpretation in engaging with the text.

Text 2 explores the way a poem that may be considered culturally and experientially 'alien' to many EIL learners can be exploited in this way to create empathy.

This poem simply but powerfully captures the tragic predicament of many a young Indian bride fated to succumb silently to the curse of what the Indian press commonly terms as 'dowry deaths'. As is suggested at the end of the poem, the press reports are often unable to

say for certain whether the death of the woman, seemingly caused while lighting a stove in the kitchen, happened by accident or contrivance, i.e., as a way of ‘punishing’ the bride for her parents’ inability to cough up a handsome enough dowry. In my observation of Alan Maley’s handling of the poem, I noted that the students were not “given” this background information beforehand, but were led to discover it by making guesses from the context and clues presented in lines of the poem.

Text 2

Another woman

This morning she bought green ‘methi’
in the market, choosing the freshest bunch,
picked up a white radish,
imagined the crunch it would make
between her teeth, the sweet sharp taste,
then put it aside, thinking it
an extravagance, counted her coins
out carefully, tied them, a small bundle
into her sari at the waist,
came home, faced her mother in law’s
dark looks, took
the leaves and chopped them,
her hands stained yellow from the juice;
cut an onion, fine, and cooked
the whole thing in the pot
(salt and cumin seeds thrown in)
over the stove,
shielding her face from the heat.

The usual words came and beat
their wings against her; the money spent,
curses heaped upon her parents,
who had sent her out
to darken other people’s doors.
She crouched, as usual, on the floor
beside the stove.
When the man came home
she did not look into his face
nor raise her head, but bent
her back a little more.
Nothing gave her the right
to speak.

She watched the flame hiss up
and beat against the cheap old pot,
a wing of brightness
against its blackened cheek.

This was the house she had been sent to,
the man she had been bound to,
the future she had been born into.

So when the kerosene was thrown
(just a moment of surprise,
a brilliant spark)
it was the only choice
that she had ever known.

Another torch, blazing in the dark.

Another woman.

We shield our faces from the heat.

Imtiaz Dharker

Activities for the poem: *Another Woman*

Many EIL students may not have the background knowledge required to appreciate the powerful impact of this poem without some information about the dowry system which traditionally prevailed, and still continues to do so today, in some parts of India. A newly-wed young woman often finds herself exposed to all kinds of ill-treatment from her husband and in-laws because her parents were unable to afford a suitable dowry as part of the marriage contract. The horrifyingly ‘dowry deaths’ are passed off as accidents caused by carelessness on the part of the woman in lighting the kitchen stove when actually she is either torched to death by the groom’s family or led to commit suicide as the only hope of escape. Through questioning and critical thinking, students need to be gradually led to interpret the poem for its subtle suggestions of how yet ‘another woman’ has met her ‘pre-destined’ end in this way, while they are encouraged to visualize the scenes in the poem with understanding and empathy.

Before you read: Look at the title of the poem. What do you think it refers to?

As you read: Read the poem and try and identify the setting in which the event took place. Which ‘foreign’ sounding words give you a clue as to where the woman is from?

After you read: Try and answer the following questions:

1. How many people are referred to in the poem? How are they related?
2. Why was the woman crouching on the floor ? Why does the poet say that she “bent her back a little more” when the man came home ?
3. What do make of “the usual words” in these lines? Who do you think speaks them? Why are the woman’s parents being cursed in these words? Try and visualize the scene. How do you think the woman felt when her parents were being cursed?

*The usual words came and beat
their wings against her; the money spent,*

*curses heaped upon her parents,
who had sent her out
to darken other people's doors.*

4. Why does the poet say this about the woman?

*Nothing gave her the right
to speak.*

5. What do these lines refer to? Who throws the kerosene? Why is there 'surprise' ?

*So when the kerosene was thrown
(just a moment of surprise,
a brilliant spark)*

5. What do you understand by these lines? Why 'another':

*Another torch, blazing in the dark.
Another woman.*

7. Why does the poet say this about the woman?

*it was the only choice
that she had ever known.*

What kinds of choices do women in your culture have today, that they didn't, say, about 50 years ago?

8. Is there anything similar to the dowry system in your own culture or any other culture you know of?

9. Imagine that the woman keeps a diary and records in it her feelings in a kind of internal monologue. What would a page from her diary look like?

CONCLUSION

In the increasingly hybrid, multidimensional world of the future, our learners will want to learn English not only to maintain social relations, but potentially to bring about educational and social change. Understanding a foreign culture, an educational goal of prime importance in this century, requires putting that culture in relation to one's own in a way that will show up our own cultural lenses. Building bridges between other cultures and one's own is the first step towards social harmony – a basic requirement if social change towards a better world is to be successfully sought and negotiated. New literatures provide the kind of textual, contextual and linguistic content that can give students valuable insights into the behaviour of people living in other cultures, especially if students can be encouraged to reflect on the differences between the foreign culture and their own in constructive ways. Such insights may also lead students "to become more consciously aware of their own culture's values and priorities – and perhaps even to examine such values and priorities more critically (Smith and Tawake, 1995: 275). This is but a small way in which what seems essentially a focus on language study can be used in the service of broader educational and social goals.

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