

# Interconnectivity of Language and Culture in a Foreign Language Classroom

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**ABSTRACT:** *This theoretical study aims to explore the differences and similarities in the roles of English for specific purposes (ESP) and English for general purposes (EGP) teachers. It also highlights the implications of these differences and similarities for English language teaching (ELT), course materials and classroom practices. The review of previous studies reveals that EGP focuses on general English language abilities of students whereas ESP focuses on specific skills and needs of learners based on a detailed analysis of learners' professional/academic needs. This distinction has important implications for ESP teachers. In addition to the role of a language teacher, an ESP practitioner has to assume certain special roles, for example, as a course designer, material provider, collaborator, researcher, evaluator and cultural interpreter. Therefore, the study recommends that special pre- and in-service training/refreshers courses should be arranged for ESP teachers so that they may become equipped to perform challenging tasks related to their job.*

**Keywords:** English Language Teaching (ELT); English for Specific Purposes (ESP); English for General Purposes (EGP); English for Academic Purposes (EAP); Needs Analysis; Material Designing.

**Introduction:**

Language is rightly considered to be a tool to interact among the social beings since it is used among them to cooperate, mingle and develop social ties with one another. In other words, it is a mode of social adaptation and integration (Keraf, 1980):3). Additionally, It is one element of culture that is an essential part of human life. If one gives prominence to language as a tool of social-cultural communication then society also serves as a context for the use of such tool. The social acts as, represented and reflected through the use of language, always vary from one society to another as each society is occupied with its specific norms and values (Deutscher 2010). For instance, the norms and values which are a part of an Eastern society cannot be of Western, as society has always been considered as an important factor in the determination of a language.

Moreover, Human beings are social and cultural beings as they do not only interact with each other to convey their messages but also transfer culture to each other. In other words, languages make their existence according to humans' social and cultural environment that can better be understood in terms of *Ecology of the languages*. *Ecology of the language* (Haugen 1972) defines the perspective where use of language becomes as much naturalistic as it can be and no more can be observed and seen by having constructed a particular ideology (Haugen 1972:325).

In fact, it is to decide that how a language takes place or to be learned in its environment with other languages or how the world (in which language survives) creates an impact on its users. It tends to encompass different aspects of language with relation to its environment. Further, Ecology may also be helpful in describing the link between different languages which can be observed in the way different languages are used; creating assumptions and beliefs related to those languages (Haugen 1972). People usually acquire language in an environment that is either bilingual or multilingual as in the world of today some languages have got higher status as compared to others.

In the present scenario, English language is considered to be an international language (Lingua Franca). So in many societies; English has become the second language. The acceptance of any foreign language in any society permits its members to acquire a culture of that language as well since awareness of the new linguistic terms leads to

awareness of the new cultural terms. So Ecology of a language can be supposed to have some social and psychological factors (Haugen 1972:325) that language operates in, and which are possessed by the individuals of a society. It is sociological as well as it occurs as a tool of interaction with other members of a society in which it is spoken and as well as psychological as it takes place in the minds of bilingual and multilingual speakers (Haugen 1972).

Additionally, Devotion to another language is common in the case of English Language as it has got the status of “Lingua Franca”, people have started learning English language from all over the world. According to Joyce Merrille Valdes (1986) learning a foreign language includes learning a foreign culture as language and culture seem to be two inseparable parts which go side by side and make one unable to understand a language without understanding the culture of that language. According to Nababan (1984: 52) there are two kinds of relationship between culture and language. Both relationships are : language is part of the culture, and a person learns the culture through language. So, successful language learners are considered to be those learners who also adopt the mindset of the target language as once they come to know about the attitude, behavior and personality traits of the target language speakers, they can understand the language effectively (Valdes 1986).

A kind of dialectical relation is presented between language and culture in this study as foreign language teachers and L2 teachers (second language teachers) all over the world prefer to use the communicative approach to language teaching. Communicative Language Teaching has been introduced in the late 1960's which laid emphasis on teaching students in real life contexts or situations (Richard & Rogers 2001). Through this approach, an attempt to develop Communicative Competence (Douglas & Frazier 2001) among learners can also be noticed. In the previous researches, no attention had been paid to real life situations so learners could not be observed to participate in any social interactions. The communicative approach suggests that teaching of language is possibly the successful language learning when language learners are exposed to the real life situations of a language. This study is to observe and fill in the vacuum that how language learning can be related to culture learning if students are learning language with the help of the communicative approach to language teaching.

In order to understand the phenomenon that language and culture are intertwined and teaching of a language is in other words teaching of culture, Pakistani students, as given admission to English Foundation and Certificate Course at National University of Modern Languages (NUML) in order to learn English language, have been observed. NUML conducts various courses in order to help people improve their language skills in the time span of six months. Each course includes some basic skills as reading, writing, listening and speaking. Reading and listening are considered to be of great importance in order to speak and write as reading and listening are receptive and speaking and writing are productive. It is better to discuss about the background of students in such courses before proceeding further. Such students are usually from mediocre background. It is for this reason that students of such courses have been taken to determine the fact that learning a language is learning a culture.

### **Background of the Study**

Reading and listening skills are part of language courses and their basic purpose is to develop communicative skills. Phonetics, grammar, and vocabulary of the language help in interpreting the texts as given to students. But even knowledge of the above mentioned elements is not sufficient to understand the reading text or listening transcript fully. In fact the cultural awareness is required because language is an important part of culture. Various researches have proved this phenomenon as Anderson (1997) mentioned that comprehension of a text relies largely on cultural knowledge or the background knowledge which one possesses about a language of the text. The following conversations can be observed to understand the above mentioned phenomenon in a better way. Such kinds of conversations are usually given to students of courses to improve their language abilities. The material provided to students is usually of real life experiences of English men as to make people learn language in real life situations and contexts.

### **Examples**

1) **A:** Bye Mum, I am off to school now.

**B:** Take care, my love. Have a nice day!

2) **A:** I met my girl friend's parents last night.

**B:** Oh poor! Haven't you met them before?

- 3) **A:** Well, darling. It's our big day soon.  
**B:** I know. I can't wait. I hope the weather's good.  
**A:** Yes, it makes such a difference, doesn't it?  
**B:** The church is looking beautiful.  
**A:** And the hotel is getting ready for the reception.  
**B:** And then there's our honeymoon.  
**A:** In Bali.  
**B:** Ah!
- A:** How many people are coming?  
**B:** About twenty or thirty.  
**A:** What have we got to eat and drink?  
**B:** Caviar and champagne. What else could anyone ask for?  
**A:** Let's move all the furniture out of this room.  
**B:** So people can dance, you mean?  
**A:** Yeah. Good idea?  
**B:** Fine.(Headway Intermediate Students' book, tapescript 34)

In the above mentioned dialogues, the purpose is to make students improve their listening abilities. In dialogue 1, the use of the words: darling and my love for the son are also alien for Pakistani students as they do not use such words for their children or parents. In dialogue 2, the use of the word "girl friend" is also adopted and made common by the Pakistani students. So Pakistani students after listening to such a conversation not only improve their expression but also learn to know that a difference exists between a friend and a girl friend. Such learning can have negative effects as well as students can start using such expressions in their own Pakistani culture which makes them away from their own cultural boundaries. But they have often misunderstanding as well which is due to the fact that they consider any girl as a girl friend if they talk to her or develop friendship. But it has got some negative connotations which are related to sexual intimacy so this understanding of foreign culture develops a negative concept among them which they often misinterpret. In dialogue 3, Words Caviar and Champagne are different from soft drinks as used in Pakistani gatherings. Similarly, the

concept of dancing of the couples after removing the furniture also adds to the knowledge of Pakistani students regarding the foreign English culture. Moreover, Americans care about others expressions and feelings if they are to invite guests so it is visible in the lines that how much respect they show to the guests as they intend to provide all the possible things to their guests.

4) **A:** So, Terry. You've been in London quite a long time now.

**B:** Mmm.

**A:** What differences do you notice between the two countries?

**B:** Obviously the biggest difference is the people. The average Englishman is ... mmm ... cold and not very open.

**A:** Oh!

**B:** In the States it's very different. We start conversations with people in the street. We're a lot more enthusiastic and spontaneous than people here. You know, when I first came, I couldn't understand what was wrong, but now I see that I was trying to be too friendly too soon.

**A:** But um, tell me, do the English improve as you get to know them?

**B:** Oh yes!

**A:** Oh, good!

**B:** Once you've made a friend, it's a friend for life, but it takes a very long time. I'll tell you something that I think is very important. English people in America are respected. Everyone wants to talk to them. We're inquisitive, we love the accent. But Americans in England are thought to be a little inferior because they get excited by everything. They think everything is so 'cute'. One thing I've learned – it's funny now, but it wasn't at the time – I couldn't understand why, when I was talking to someone, they would move away, you know, move backwards. I thought, 'Do I smell? Am I boring?' The reason was, you see, Americans stand closer when they're talking.

**A:** Ah, that's interesting. What about your impressions of living here? How does that compare with the States?

**B:** Well, mmm ... I think life's a lot easier in the States. It's easier to *make* money and it's easier to *spend* it. Shops are open all the time over there. When I first came to England you had to race to reach the

supermarket before 5.30, but this has changed. Some shops are open later now, and on Sundays, but they are still harder to find than in the States.

**A:** Yeah. But it *is* a lot better than it was.

**B:** Sure. And another thing is Americans *work* a lot harder than you do here. To the English, their private lives are important, their holidays are important, their gardens are important, their dogs are important, but for Americans, *work* is the most important thing in our lives. You know, holidays seem to be longer here, and around Christmas and New Year the whole country closes down for two weeks!

**A:** Oh, come on!

**B:** It's true! We Americans are like the Japanese in this respect. We live to work.

**A:** So you don't like London very much!

**B:** Oh, you would think so from what I'm saying, wouldn't you? No, in fact I really love it here. I go home once a year and I really look forward to coming back here. This is my home now. I find life safer, more relaxed, and much more enjoyable. The Underground isn't very clean but at least you can use it and feel safe. And your taxi drivers are wonderful! They tell you their life stories and know every street in London. Maybe I've gotten into English habits! England doesn't have the dramatic beauty of the States, but oh, it ... it's very pretty and charming in a way that I find comforting (New Headway, Intermediate Students' Book, tape script 46 b).

The above script is from American background too and explores the differences between Americans and English effectively to the Pakistani students. Hence they can get awareness about how do people in America and England behave? They also become capable enough to make comparison between the two cultures which in turn adds to their knowledge of the culture regarding different dialects of the English language. In addition, they also come to know about more informal expressions as part of American culture as: comforting, gotten, wonderful, pretty and charming etc.

Further, in the above extract, the qualities of English men as: cold, not open, not work much harder, and Americans as: working hard, open, live to work, associate positive qualities with Americans and negative with English men. At the same time, such differences make Pakistanis

perceptions negative about English men and positive about Americans as they are not only learning language but also the cultural variations.

5) John: What is your opinion about the new book of Charles Dickens?

Trim: I love that.....it's awesome.

John: But it didn't appeal me.

Trim: oh no! What do you think of Edinburgh then?

John: to some extent it's nice...

Trim: I think it's awful.

John: So how do you rate Dark's new song?

Trim: I think it's tremendous (Follow me book:3 programmes 31-45)

The purpose of the dialogue can be to teach students about adjectives. But they do not learn only adjectives they also learn about various cultural aspects like the name of the place Edinburgh, the name of the novelist; Charles Dickens, and the name of the singer Dark. So it is not only teaching of language, it is also teaching of culture. If teacher does not tell students about Charles, Edinburgh and Dark then students will not be able to learn and comprehend the conversation effectively. In fact, the whole understanding of dialogue demands understanding of various cultural aspects as well.

Other than listening transcripts, students also learn culture by reading passages. But comprehension about the reading passages develops by knowing about cultural norms as the following reading passage of English society explains:

1)My first wife and I had one daughter Carmen. I have always wanted the best for her. We sent her to a good school but she was not happy there. She left school as she wanted to become an actress. So with my connections, I got her into drama school. But she didn't like either. She worked for a while doing small roles in films (cf Headway Intermediate, by Liz & Soaras)

Now in the above reading passage, freedom and liberty of the daughter as a child is portrayed that how children particularly daughter can take such steps in western society which are hard to be taken even by the boys of Pakistani society though it is a patriarchal society. It reveals English



language culture to Pakistani students where situation is just the opposite and parents exercise authority or power over the family issues and play vital role in solving them. Students' purpose of reading the passage is to develop their reading skills but they receive cultural shock as well.

Moreover, students are also given various grammatical exercises to solve while teaching them grammatical categories. But in learning grammar as well, they acquire cultural aspects. For example if teacher asks the students to convert the direct speech into indirect one:

1) Will you go to the movies with me on Friday?" said Mike to Juli.

Mike asked Juli if he would go to movies with him on Friday.

2) Sure I will go to the movies with you on Friday, "said Juli.

Juli said she would go to the movies with him on Friday.

3) I am not going to the church on Sunday, said Rina.

Rina told that she wasn't going to church on Sunday(Effective Writing by Jean Withrow).

The above examples of grammar help to make students know about reported speech but they learn the other aspects too like girls are free to stay outside and can easily go to movies with boys without any restrictions being made by their families. So it is a cultural aspect associated with grammatical aspect of language. Secondly, Friday is a special day for Pakistani students being Muslims but not for English society where Sunday is given status of important day in order to attend religious ceremonies. While teaching grammar, teachers try to give examples of the texts provided in the grammar books which in turn present the ways of life of English men that how do they spend their lives?

The above mentioned excerpts refer to language teaching as a culture teaching as teachers not only teach the language which is basically matter of symbols but they also associate various meaning with those symbols in accordance with the culture. Language is reflection of the society in which it is spoken so each language reflects its culture. Students of various backgrounds at NUML join these language courses to develop their language skills but they also come to know about culture of English language.

It has also been suggested that cultural values are reflected through the forms and usage of a language in a society. While teaching a language, teachers mention to the students that how to use some expressions (like greetings, requests and agreeing or disagreeing with someone) in the language hence to communicate effectively. Teachers make the students realize the fact that appropriate expressions are required in order to lead to a successful interaction in a target language. It can be said that culture can be taught implicitly while teaching the language as language and culture are intertwined.

### **Conclusions**

Teaching of language leads to teaching of culture as it can bring tremendous changes in the individuals who accept the cultural norms of new culture easily as Pakistanis have replaced their habits of saying “Salam” with “hi” etc and “Allah hafiz” with “bye”. But it is also the perspective that such assimilation of a culture hinders Pakistani speakers from receiving any kinds of cultural shocks while their visits to the English speaking countries. Similarly, “Grammatical competence” (knowledge of a language) and “Communicative competence” (actual use of language according to the context) are the two concepts given by Canale and Swain (1980) among which communicative competence can be inculcated in learners by giving them cultural awareness. So such facts cannot be ignored that while teaching language as part of culture, teachers can be able to make students develop communicative competence for which no one can have any objection as English is requirement of the time and needs to be taught effectively. In a nutshell, effective teaching requires dealing with various cultural aspects. Hence teaching of language is more often teaching of culture.

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