

Rome Wasn't Built in a Day: Integrating Culture a Little at a Time

Lindsay N. Herron

(Gwangju Nat'l Univ. of Education)

I. Introduction

English educators today generally agree that culture is an integral aspect of language indeed, culture and language are inextricably intertwined. To understand the nuances of a language and the appropriate circumstances for language use, some knowledge of culture is necessary, while language in turn can illuminate many facets of a culture. But what aspects of culture can we teach in an English classroom, and how can we integrate it into our curriculum?

Cultural educators have described many effective approaches to teaching "little-c" culture (e.g., daily practices, lifestyle, behaviors): culture assimilators, role-plays, mini-dramas, classroom discussions, culture capsules, and more (e.g., Cullen 2000; Heinrichsen, 1997). Unfortunately, these approaches, while excellent for teaching culture, are less practical in a Korean English classroom setting, which is constricted by the requirements of the national curriculum. There are many ways, however, to integrate culture bit by bit, without having to allocate a large amount of time to it. By raising learners' cultural awareness incrementally over the course of a year, a teacher can give learners the tools for exploring and understanding other cultures, questioning assumptions, and gaining insights into their own culture. With these goals in mind, below are three suggestions, drawn from a variety of approaches, of ways teachers can integrate culture into their lessons without devoting significant time to a "Culture Lesson."

II. Suggestions for Integrating Culture

1. Piquing Interest

Teaching about holidays, festivals, dances, stories, food, etc., can be a great way to pique interest in a culture and raise awareness of different beliefs and traditions. Depending on a

teacher's preference and available time, this can be quite in-depth. With enough time, one can include extensive audiovisual information (e.g., photos, music, videos, traditional stories, realia) and hands-on traditional activities (e.g., carving jack-o-lanterns, hunting for Easter eggs, learning a traditional Irish social dance). At the very least, teaching these aspects of culture can include eye-catching (if brief) explanations of symbols and traditions. After the initial presentation, it's possible to use the holiday or festival as a context for the target language of the lesson. The only limit is the teacher's imagination. For example, Halloween is great for learning or practicing the names of body parts, expressing opinions (about monsters/horror movies/costumes/jack-o-lanterns), providing excuses (e.g., why is each monster late for the party?), counting, comparatives (which monster or jack-o-lantern is hairier/scarier/bigger/stronger/cuter, etc.), describing people (or monsters)—nearly any target language, actually. Just add monsters, autumn, or creepy-crawly things. Holidays can also provide a fun context for review games: students can complete review worksheets to earn parts of a Thanksgiving dinner, for example, or solve review puzzles to earn clues that eventually lead to a leprechaun's hidden gold. A holiday theme takes little time to establish but can add an air of festivity to any class, piquing students' interest while reinforcing the various symbols and traditions of the holiday, making them easier to recognize and comprehend in future encounters (in books or movies, for example).

2. Exploring Cultural Connotations and Expectations

One basic step in teaching culture is to alert learners to the existence of difference; that is, that their conceptions are not necessarily the same as those of people from other cultures. A simple way to do this is to highlight differences in schema. For example, what do your students think of when they hear words such as *family*, *birthday*, *breakfast*, *friend*, or *Christmas*? What they envision, and what they understand to be the meaning of these words, is likely to be different from what an American would understand and imagine. These differences in conceptualization are not the result of mistranslation but rather a culturally generated gap in experience, and they can be taught as a natural part of vocabulary lessons.

Related to this is the teaching of socio-linguistic competence; that is, helping students understand in what situations the target language is acceptable. It can be useful here to ask students to think about their own language and culture, in order to explore differences. For example, when is it appropriate to ask *How old are you?* or *Do you have a boyfriend?* When can one use familial relationship titles (e.g., *brother*, *aunt*)? How and when can one give and receive compliments? Is it better to encourage friends with *Study hard* or *Don't*

Extensive Reading and Listening: Why, What and How?

study too hard? The implications of such language use vastly vary by culture, and teachers can nurture cultural awareness by taking a moment to consider these differences and the underlying reasons for them. As many researchers (e.g., Singhal, 1998) have noted, understanding cultural/content schema is key to comprehension. Understanding the use of language—who says it, to whom, in what situations, and why—is key to deciphering the meaning and intent of an utterance, and can also reveal differences in culture.

3. Questioning Generalizations

When teaching culture, it's easy to over-simplify, to gloss over differences *within* a culture and offer generalizations for the sake of efficiency and simplicity. This can be detrimental to one's efforts to help students understand and empathize with people from other cultures, however. Overgeneralization can reinforce stereotypes, create fixed (often erroneous) ideas about the target culture, and lead students to make assumptions about the people they meet from that culture. Instead, teachers should help students learn to identify and question generalizations and assumptions. After all, not only are Americans different from Koreans, Americans are different from the English, Scottish, and Irish; they're different from Canadians, Australians, and New Zealanders. Americans are even different from *Americans*! Keeping this in mind, it's vital for teachers not to over-simplify, but rather to emphasize that everyone is different. By continuously highlighting generalizations and stereotypes, teachers give students the tools to discover for themselves the nuances of a culture without the bias of preconceptions. In addition, a teacher doesn't need to have thorough knowledge of the target culture for this; instead of teaching basic facts, this is, in essence, teaching students how to analyze and question.

III. Conclusion

Teaching culture is a vital part of teaching language, and it can be incorporated very naturally into a lesson. With a bit of knowledge and preparation, teachers can kindle students' cultural interest, awareness, and empathy, simultaneously giving them a sound foundation for further exploration of other cultures while beginning to ponder the significance of their own language, culture, and traditions.

References

- Cullen, B. (2000). "Practical Techniques for Teaching Culture in the EFL Classroom." *The Internet TESL Journal*, Vol. VI(12), December 2000. Retrieved from <http://iteslj.org/Techniques/Cullen-Culture.html>
- Heinrichsen, L. E. (22 November 1997). "Understanding Culture and Helping Students Understand Culture." Retrieved from <http://linguistics.byu.edu/classes/ling577lh/culture.html>
- Singhal, Meena (1998). "A Comparison of L1 and L2 Reading: Cultural Differences and Schema." *The Internet TESL Journal*, Vol. IV(10), October 1998. Retrieved from <http://iteslj.org/Articles/Singhal-ReadingL1L2.html>

Lindsay N. Herron has been a visiting professor in the Department of English Education at Gwangju National University of Education since 2008; prior to that, she taught English on a Fulbright grant at Seogwipo High School in Jeju-do. She has a master's degree in cinema studies from New York University and bachelor's degrees in English and psychology from Swarthmore College, has worked at several top publishing companies in the United States, and recently finished her CELTA-YL Extension.