

## TEACHING CULTURE IN THE ENGLISH AS A SECOND LANGUAGE CLASS: IS IT POSSIBLE?

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**RESUMO:** O inglês é internacionalmente considerado uma língua global e, diante desse cenário atual, é cada vez mais necessária a introdução de reflexões e discussões culturais na aula de inglês como língua estrangeira. A tarefa do professor é estimular o interesse dos alunos pela cultura e ajudar na formação da ideia de que a aula de língua estrangeira não é um momento exclusivo de ensino de linguagem, mas uma oportunidade de diferentes tipos de aprendizagens através de interações entre os participantes. Ainda, o ensino da cultura motiva o estudante de língua no processo de aprendizagem, pois ajuda o aprendiz a observar semelhanças e diferenças entre vários grupos culturais e diminuir as chances de julgamentos impróprios sobre sua cultura em relação às outras. A partir dessa realidade, o objetivo deste artigo é relatar uma pesquisa realizada a partir de possíveis atividades que podem ser utilizadas na aprendizagem de uma língua estrangeira tendo em mente a aproximação entre o ensino de língua e cultura e quais impactos essas atividades podem ter nos aprendizes de uma segunda língua.

**Palavras-chave:** ensino; cultura; língua.

### Ensinar cultura inglesa na aula de inglês como segunda língua: é possível?

**ABSTRACT:** As English is internationally considered a global language in today's world, there is a growing need for the discussion and reflection of culture in the English as a Second Language classroom. A teacher's role is to stimulate student interest in culture and incite the idea that the foreign language classroom is not only a moment to teach language, but an opportunity for different types of learning through participant interaction. The teaching of culture motivates students throughout the learning process, as it allows learners to observe similarities and differences within various cultural groups and diminishes the chances for learners to create improper judgments about their own culture in relation to others. With this in mind, this study presents research carried out through possible activities to be used in the foreign language classroom linking language and culture and discusses the impact these activities could have on foreign language learners.

**Keywords:** teaching; culture; language.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

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English is internationally considered a global language (CRYSTAL, 2003; GRADDOL, 2006), thus the introduction of cultural discussions in the English as a second language classroom is becoming more and more relevant. However, in many aspects, culture is implicitly taught through grammar that students are exposed to. In order to make the students culturally conscious, teachers may expose some elements from the target culture and focus on the most important characteristics for the members from that specific community.

It is part of the second language teacher's role to stimulate the student's interest in culture and incite the construction of the idea that class time is not only a moment to teach language, but also an opportunity for different kinds of learning through the participant's interaction (KRAMSCH, 1993). Nevertheless, learners must first become aware of the idea of being part of a culture. Exploring their own culture, they are ready to reflect on the values, traditions and expectations from different peoples. Also, practicing culture in a foreign language classroom may motivate students in the learning process as it helps the learner to observe similarities and differences among different cultural groups and reduces the chances of improper judgments about their culture in relation to others (GENC; BADA, 2005). Therefore, looking at the other's culture is to have the possibility of considering your own culture through new eyes. According to Cecilia & Ojeda (2007), some objectives to teach culture in a foreign language class are: to see other cultures as knowledge sources; to develop cultural consciousness in the students; to expose the students to relevant topics in the different cultures; to make learners think about cultural differences; to give the opportunity for students to think critically. According to Leffa (2002), the biggest problem foreign language speakers face is not knowing enough about a language and culture to really understand what they hear or to say what they really mean. Thus, it is necessary for foreign language speakers to be culturally sensitive.

This article explores the idea of culture as connected to language and the importance of dealing with this connection in a foreign language class. Section 2 briefly reviews this topic, Section 3 presents the research which was carried out with some possible activities to work with culture in class, and Section 4 summarizes the main conclusions of this study.

## **2. CULTURE AND LANGUAGE**

Considering that teaching a foreign language nowadays requires so much knowledge about various aspects of language education, it is crucial to work with culture integrated with

all the other dimensions of Foreign Language Teaching, not only as an appendix. According to Kramsch (1993), "culture in language learning is not an expandable fifth skill (í ) It is always in the background, right from day one" (KRAMSCH, 1993, p. 1). The relationship between language and culture implies working also with anthropology, philosophy, psychology and, of course, linguistics.

Therefore, although it may not be clearly seen by language teachers and students, there is a strong connection between culture and language. According to Kramsch (1998), language expresses, embodies and symbolizes cultural reality. People express facts and ideas through words because they refer to common knowledge about the world or certain places. The way people express their experiences is understandable to the group they belong to and speakers identify themselves and others through their use of language, which is viewed as a symbol of their social identity.

Byram (1989) states that Cultural Studies are integral components of language teaching with appropriate aims and methods. Moreover, it is a pedagogical activity, so it is necessary to consider the processes of teaching and learning which might take place. There should be a methodology of cultural teaching which considers a theoretical discussion of educational aims, concepts of culture and cultural learning, besides pedagogical structuring.

According to Byram, using a foreign language is a question of making possible social contact with people from another culture. However, this ability is hard to obtain when a lot of the work done today in schools focuses on acquiring skills only for utilitarian purposes. Consequently, teachers have been more worried about methods of teaching language skills than about personal education. In this way, it is important to identify "three interwoven strands in a foreign language teaching: language use, awareness of the nature of language, and understanding of foreign and native culture" (BYRAM, 1989, p. 23). Each of them contributes to learner's general education, and each is interdependent with the others. It is necessary though to clarify the cultural learning strand and its relation to the other two.

Kramsch (1993) suggests an alternative to the traditional way in which language teaching has been viewed and presented; that is, an emphasis on the "four skills" and the notion of "culture" as a fifth, separate topic taught through the presentation of facts. She considers the language classroom itself a place where cross-cultural miscommunication arises and, therefore, calls for the creation of a space in which the teaching of culture exists within and as a part of the teaching of other skills. In other words, cultural context becomes the core of classroom interactions. As is often evidenced by daily classroom interactions, Kramsch

(1993) offers an explanation of the general difficulty of creating this type of environment in a second language classroom: "The educational challenge is teaching language as context within a dialogic pedagogy that makes context explicit, thus enabling text and context to interact dialectically in the classroom" (KRAMSCH, 1993, p. 13).

Kramsch stresses the implementation of a dialogic pedagogy in which two types of dialogues will hopefully occur: an instructional dialogue in which language is explicitly practiced and clear educational objectives may be met, and an exchange of ideas and emotions that may question or challenge the *status quo*. It is within this framework that culture is able to become a part of language teaching and learning, permitting language educators to set goals that may not be easily measurable and, at the same time, allowing language learners to realize the potential for growth and self-expression in language learning. Kramsch summarizes this notion as an opportunity for educational, rather than merely instructional, objectives.

It is within this environment that learners and educators may properly take advantage of the existence of a "context of culture", a term used to describe "the institutional and ideological background knowledge shared by participants in speech events. This context (...) consists of "structures of expectation" that allow people to make sense of the world around them" (KRAMSCH, 1993, p. 42). Though this shared knowledge is what may facilitate communication amongst native speakers of a language, it conversely presents sometimes unexpected challenges to learners of a foreign language. Within the context of a foreign language classroom, it brings to light the fact "teachers and learners are often not aware of the cultural nature of their discourse" (KRAMSCH, 1993, p. 43). To demonstrate this issue, the author provides the following example: "In the United States, foreign language learners try to replicate in French or German such untransferable Anglo-American concepts as: "to be in control", "to be committed to", "setting one's priorities", "creating opportunities" without even realizing how ideologically laden such phrases are" (KRAMSCH, 1993, p. 43). If such situations that commonly occur in a foreign language classroom are dealt with within the scope of a context of culture, it becomes the instructor's role to at least make students aware of these cultural differences, bridging the perceived gap between language and culture in the foreign language classroom.

Once the foreign language classroom is perceived as a space in which the culture of context exists, the interdependence of language and culture may become apparent. Because this space exists somewhere between the native and target languages and cultures, learners are

forced to create "third places" in which to negotiate meaning. Though language learners may sometimes feel powerless due to their limitations within the target language, language learning can be a process in which students gain power through this negotiation of meaning between native language and culture and target language and culture. Exploring culture through language is a process that can empower learners by providing deeper insights to and understandings of the target community.

Another contribution of foreign language teaching to students' general education is to make them aware of the similarities and differences that exist between culturally distinct groups. The link between multicultural education and foreign language teaching has the intention to create understanding and tolerance of others. Students who are exposed to this way of viewing language will probably be able to understand that otherness is not a threat to our identity, but a means of maintaining our identity (BYRAM, 1989).

In this way, culture and language are also linked to group identity. What people perceive about a person's culture and language is what they have been conditioned by their own culture to see. As stated by Kramsch (1998):

"It is widely believed that there is a natural connection between the language spoken by members of a social group and that group's identity. By their accent, their vocabulary, their discourse patterns, speakers identify themselves and are identified as members of this or that speech and discourse community" (KRAMSCH, 1998, p. 65).

Also, the group one belongs to is highly influenced by the cultural identities of its members.

Kramsch (1998) uses two concepts when discussing the relation of language and culture, native speakers and language learners: authenticity and appropriateness. Language learners frequently have a strong desire to behave and think like native speakers in order to be recognized and validated by them. However, this idea is somewhat contradictory: while some try to avoid sounding foreign, others have a strong wish to show from where they come. According to the author: "(...) cultural appropriateness may need to be replaced by the concept of appropriation, whereby learners make a foreign language and culture their own by adopting and adapting it to their own needs and interests" ((KRAMSCH, 1998, p. 81).

### 3. RESEARCH

This section describes a study which was carried out through keeping in mind the ideas presented in the previous section. Some activities were developed in order to research how culture can be incorporated in the teaching of a foreign language.

The activities were created and implemented through work as Fulbright English Teaching Assistants (ETAs) in the "Letras" undergraduate course in a federal university, in Brazil. Though the activities were carried out by native speakers of English who have lived in the United States for most of their lives, it is attempted to show that any language teacher with the intention of fundamentally connecting culture to foreign language teaching can use the activities.

The research took place during two years. As an observant and participant in English language classes at the university, professors would often ask the ETAs to develop activities different from what was found in the textbook, emphasizing culturally specific information that they could impart to students because of their experience in the U.S. The following examples will outline activities that were particularly successful, problematic or memorable during this research.

The first example occurred in an Advanced English Language class, which included about 30 students in their fourth semester of English language classes. This particular class was intended to review and solidify the grammatical concepts learned in the previous semesters of study, focusing on new vocabulary, cultural topics, and refining students' language use. One particular chapter, studied near the end of the semester, introduced the concept of laws. It included vocabulary on laws that are commonly broken, reading sections about laws that exist in different countries, etc. As a supplement to the material presented in the textbook and as a means to use the ETAs' cultural knowledge of and experience in the U.S., she began an activity with the students by presenting information about Capital Punishment. The ETA presented basic dates and facts about this law, outlined the fundamental arguments behind the opposing sides within this issue, and guided a discussion that included questions about if any similar law existed in Brazil. Though the questions were simple and direct, the nature of the issue allowed for students to draw comparisons between their own country and the United States, and generally analyze the issue in a deeper way than the questions themselves required. After this initial step of the activity, in which not all students spoke, but all seemed to be participating and actively listening, some information and instructions on the topic of the debate were introduced. After outlining basic rules and time limits and introducing vocabulary that they could use for this specific situation, the ETA separated the

class into two groups and randomly assigned each an opposing side in the following debate topic: "The death penalty prevents future murders". The rules presented specified that each group had two minutes to discuss their opening arguments. After these two minutes, in which each group organized its thoughts, selected members of "Group A" would have two minutes to present their argument, selected members of "Group B" would have two minutes to respond, and vice versa, with a general time limit of 20 minutes for the entire activity. The ETA was the "judge" of the "debate championship" and informed students that she would be judging their performances on the following parameters: clarity of argument, use of specific debate vocabulary, and language fluency.

After establishing procedures and carrying out the activity, some unexpected results were seen as both successes and failures. The first one is the assigning of three students to communicate the ideas of a group of fifteen students. Though the debate began with only the speaking of these three students at the time of presenting an argument, as the activity continued and more issues were presented, more outspoken students began actively to participate in the discussion. Here, the ETA was struck with a dilemma that many language teachers face: remind these students that only the three assigned students were asked to speak and stop their active participation, or allow the debate to more "naturally" take its course and hope that outspoken students will not stifle the participation of others? In this particular instance, she chose the latter option. What resulted was a passionate debate from both sides. Though students were considerate of time limits and allowing one group to speak at a time, the students who were originally assigned to be the group spokespeople were soon not speaking as much as hoped.

Among the activities created outside of class for students studying English, the most interesting ones were Conversation Club and an activity titled "Daily Usage English," which focused on "real-life" usages of English.

Conversation Club topics included, but were not limited to, family, time, money, the Olympics, law breaking, cultural stereotypes, professions, corruption, and other cultural topics that were currently in the media. For conversation clubs, articles or podcasts that had interviews plus analysis were usually selected. As a group, the conversation from several perspectives could be analyzed. First, they sought a textual understanding of the phrases, vocabulary, and grammar used. Second, they attempted to understand the content conceptually. Using real, relevant and up-to-date articles and radio as a teaching tool was valuable because students were exposed to real cultural sources.

Each session would begin with a general introduction of the topic, sometimes allow 10 minutes at the beginning of the session for students to write their general thoughts about the given topic, give students some type of text as a starting point to discussion (a newspaper article, a video, a podcast, etc.), and, finally, pose questions to the students related to the topic. Some positive results of this type of activity were that students were usually eager and motivated to present their opinions, they were able to draw comparisons between their own culture and their vision of the culture of the U.S., and they were usually able to carry on a natural conversation in the target language. Some outcomes that were problematic included, as in the previous example, the controversial nature of some of the topics presented and the varying levels of language use of the students present. Though the main goal with the chosen topics was for students to make cultural comparisons, students were sometimes resistant to discussing cultural topics that may be perceived as negative. One particular example occurred when discussing the general topic of time. After giving students an article found on a Brazilian English language current events blog that discussed Brazilians' and Americans' differing cultural perspectives on time, a student was slightly offended at an existent cultural stereotype of Brazilians being unpunctual. Though resistant at first, after some discussion of the topic, possibilities for the existence of this stereotype, and the consideration that cultural stereotypes may not be true, the student became much more open to participate and admitted that now she could consider the topic from a different perspective. From this experience, it was learned that, though controversial topics may be challenging to introduce, they may yield positive results.

Another example of activity was when the Middle East protests began in 2011 and spread globally. The teacher brought a podcast from National Public Radio (NPR) of an interview with an American protestor in New York City. Before they listened to the podcast, she introduced new vocabulary that students would hear and gave a brief summary of what would be discussed to center the students' attention on certain parts of the conversation. She also wrote several questions on the board so that students could target their listening. Students were asked to think of questions in the context of their experience with present and historical protests in Brazil. Combining audio, targeted questions, and vocabulary helped keep the conversation active. The audio also challenged the students to understand a different speaker and a different speech pace.

Daily Usage English session topics included travel, restaurants, interviews, and authority figures. Detail will be provided on what was considered the most successful session:



restaurants. To introduce the topic, the ETA played a humorous video showing what may be considered impolite by Western cultural standards at a restaurant. Then, as a warm-up activity, she gave students a multiple-choice questionnaire asking specific information about restaurant etiquette in the U.S.: tipping, reservations, ordering, etc. Students had many questions specifically about tipping and the differing social implications of being a restaurant server in each country. This topic was discussed throughout two more sessions with activities including specific vocabulary and informal language students may hear in a restaurant in the U.S. and dialogue practice in which they had to react to different situations they might encounter in a restaurant. The most successful aspect of this activity was the cultural discussions that this general and seemingly superficial topic allowed. For example, initial questions about tipping practices in the U.S. led to a discussion of how the service industry is socially viewed and why American television has so many sitcoms about servers. It is these unplanned, surprising moments in structured activities that, though may have yielded positive and/or negative results, have been the most memorable and have allowed the ETAs and students to learn and analyze many perspectives on the teaching of culture in a foreign language.

The following activities discussed in this section will work more deeply with the idea of language and culture. Culture in the United States was discussed by combining the "little c" and the "big C" elements of culture. For example, the ETAs incorporated a discussion of daily habits or cultural norms with a history or literature. This combination of elements allowed them to balance a discussion of culture in subjective terms and on objective terms. When planning their lessons on culture, it was important for them to: (1) discuss present stereotypes about the United States and (2) reach few conclusions about the culture in the United States (3) in order to develop more questions and open ways of thinking about language and culture such that the students could (4) understand which historical interactions or culture elements became part of and continue to influence daily habits and norms.

The ETA organized her activities around the theme of the road (on the road) to focus on the culture (little c) in the United States as an evolving force that is connected and is greatly influenced by (Big C) Culture. Three presentations illustrate this organization: (a) Introduction to Big C and Little Culture in the United States - Breaking Stereotypes; (b) Hit the Road Jack - Music in the United States and (c) Presentation on Thanksgiving. In each lecture, the ETA incorporated a personal element (subjective cultural component), an interactive element, and a combination of little c (daily norms) and Big C (visible/objective

culture) to create a space where students could generate their own theories about everyday culture in the United States based on firmly established premises of the culture.

Below is a detailed example of each lecture:

*(a) American Pie: Slices of Habits and Lifestyles in the U.S. - the Road to a National Identity:*

A survey organized by the U.S. Department of Labor was used to show the activities most U.S. residents spent their day performing. Using this survey, the ETA began the discussion about U.S. stereotypes. Students were asked if what they currently thought about Americans fit within the national survey. After this icebreaker, she divided the class into four groups. Each group was assigned only the name of an American that it had to describe based on their expectations or stereotypes of the name. The names were John, Matt, Conchita, and Miya. Each group had to develop the person's activities and beliefs. Most students referenced what they had seen in movies. Afterward, the ETA described whom each of those people were and what they actually did. Some students developed accurate descriptions while others incorporated our earlier discussion about an "American's Day" to influence their description. This activity combined subjective elements, with a broader discussion of daily habits, cultural norms and national values and how each influences the other. After this activity, using Miss Manners (description below), she posed questions about real situations of habits or cultural norms that Americans ask other Americans. For example, what to do in romantic relationships, how to behave with coworkers, or how to act in the home of relatives. Using this activity, the ETA could demonstrate that even Americans who have grown up or lived in the United States for years may not know how to behave in certain situations. Miss Manners, the author of the advice column, responded to each scenario with broadly acceptable ways to behave in each situation. Her responses demonstrated agreed upon norms that reflect American values. These examples were more accurate and often more revealing than examples reflected in movies or TV shows.

*(b) Hit the Road Jack - Music in the United States:* The discussion of music in the U.S. started with a discussion of music in the years before the Civil War (1840s). By starting in this period, it was possible to discuss the diverse roots that have shaped popular music in the 20th century. This allowed them to discuss the historical and political context of the burgeoning music scene in the United States, as well as the societal tensions that accompanied the role of slaves and African Americans in the founding of the United States's finest musical traditions.

Students were interested in seeing how the music they enjoyed was rooted in a period of U.S. history about they did not know. Students could also better understand the evolution of music through the 20th century with this historical context. Important in this lesson was discussing the historical context, the author of the song, and the lyrics. Using the lyrics, they discussed grammatical questions, emphasized new vocabulary, and demonstrated how language had evolved.

(c) *The Paradoxes of Thanksgiving*: The presentation began with an emphasis on values and beliefs in the U.S. to discuss how and why Thanksgiving has been known as the most American of holidays. The following five themes were chosen: (1) National Identity; (2) Historical "American-ness"; (3) Consumption; (4) Contradiction and (5) Controversy to focus on the paradoxes of Thanksgiving. First, the ETA discussed the historical roots of the holiday - acknowledging the controversy between the European presence and the presence of Native Americans in the northeast U.S. Next, she discussed modern holiday traditions such as the Thanksgiving meal, gathering of families, football games, parades, and Black Friday. She also discussed the ironies of the holiday. For example, many immigrants celebrate the holiday without eating the traditional "American" foods, instead combining traditional "American" meals with typical meals from their home countries. Additionally, while the holiday is one of giving thanks and being with family, it is also a day associated with massive, sometimes wasteful, consumption. While most students were familiar with U.S. culture and knew something about Thanksgiving, discussing the historical roots, the present ironies, and the exceptions to the holiday helped challenge some of the stereotypical notions of what "traditional" is in the United States. By showing these contradictions, students were better equipped to be critical of traditional or homogenous culture, while understanding that there are homogenous elements that bring together "old" and "new" Americans.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

Fulbright ETAs (or native speakers in general) - can contribute enormously to bridging cultural and linguistic understandings between the United States and Brazil. Using creative activities that incorporate daily culture with historical and societal context is critical to building this broader understanding of language and culture in the United States. Moreover, generating these activities requires an awareness of the host country's needs. The success of

an ETA in a country rests on a partnership between the ETA and the host institution that builds off of pre-existing efforts and strengthens each other's efforts.

However, though the ETAs' experience living in the U.S. may have facilitated the choosing of topics and impromptu cultural discussions, it is believed that any language teacher may either already have this knowledge after studying a language in-depth, or can research specific topics to gain this knowledge. In other words, this type of cultural knowledge is not exclusive to those that belong to a particular culture. In the outlined activities, the realization of the activities produced outcomes, good or bad, that may increase students' cultural knowledge and understanding.

To reinforce what has been said so far, we strongly believe, as many authors do, in the close relationship between language and culture, and the necessity to teach both in an integrated way. This integration is only possible if, at least, some notions of other subjects such as anthropology, psychology and sociolinguistics are introduced in the foreign language class. Another aspect to be considered in a foreign language teaching is that the language taught is both the object of study and the medium used for teaching and learning. Byram (1989) proposes it should be used as a medium, not for problem-solving, but for teaching and learning about the people and culture associated with it (1989, p. 51). Therefore, if it is believed that language teaching improves intercultural relationships, changes should be made in a foreign language education in order to treat culture as an integral part of the theme.

If we want to account for an intercultural language curriculum, we must consider language goals which complement the skills and competences required for cultural exploration. Corbett (2010), referring to Byram's work, states that the five aspects of intercultural communicative competence can be summarized as: (a) knowing the self and the other; (b) knowing how to relate and interpret meaning; (c) developing critical awareness; (d) knowing how to discover cultural information; and (e) knowing how to relativize oneself and value the attitudes and beliefs of others (CORBETT, 2010, p. 2).

In order to develop this idea of integration in the foreign language classroom, the teacher needs to find support in the material used. Therefore, the choice of textbooks should be extremely careful. Byrman (1989) mentions that there is a strong influence of the textbook in the content and direction of lessons, especially in their cultural content. Teachers who took part in that research also talked about the importance for students to know other ways of living and, through this knowledge, become more tolerant of other peoples. Cultural information is seen as a pedagogic device for capturing the interest of pupils, contextualizing

their language learning, giving light relief or filling in lessons where language learning is believed to be limitedö (BYRMAN, 1989, p. 128).

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