

Stern (1992) outlines proposals for a ‘cultural syllabus’ to be incorporated into second/foreign language education. What, in your view, should be the main aims of a ‘cultural syllabus’ in EFL/ESL programmes and how might these be best achieved?

David Evans, University of Birmingham, April 2000

1 Introduction

Every teacher gives insights to their own culture. Sometimes this is done unwittingly, through appearance, behaviour and opinions, and sometimes in response to questions from students within the class. However, although this is better than nothing, it is haphazard and unplanned. It is also too narrow, as any particular individual will have their own particular idiosyncrasies, which may not be typical of the mainstream culture.

Whether culture should be studied as a separate subject is a contentious issue. Defining exactly what is meant by ‘culture’ is the first problem for an EFL teacher. Whether culture should refer to everyday life, or to more classical aspects of culture, or a combination of the two, is a question that needs careful consideration. Equally important is to ask what the aim is in teaching culture. For students who are going to study, work or even visit a foreign country then some knowledge of culture in the anthropological sense, would seem to be justified. For students who do not have such reasons, or for students who have no interest, then it could be argued that culture might best be omitted from any syllabus. The level of the students’ English, their age and the country in which they are studying will also have implications for the content of any cultural syllabus .

Furthermore, in teaching English language culture consideration must be given to whose culture is being represented, not merely in terms of nationality, whether it should be British, American, Australian or ‘Western’, but in terms of which group within that society is being portrayed.

Assuming that answers can be satisfactorily found for these questions, then the

practicalities of who teaches it, what the content is and how it is taught need to be addressed. This essay will attempt to answer these questions.

2 Problems in deciding on a cultural syllabus

2.1 Defining a cultural syllabus for EFL/ESL programmes

Seelye refused to define culture, calling it ‘a broad concept that embraces all aspects of the life of man’, (1984:26) and Douglas-Brown calls it ‘the “glue” that binds a group of people together’ (1994:163). Because of the difficulty in defining this “glue” Stern reports that writers ‘have tried to reduce the vast and amorphous nature of the culture concept to manageable proportions by preparing lists of items or by indicating a few broad categories’(1992:208). Stern continues by discounting such lists as suggested by Brooks and Chastain as providing only ‘cultural titbits’. Nostrand’s emergent model of 1978 is praised by Stern as an attempt to overcome this, as is Seelye’s observation that all of mankind have the same needs, and that different groups will satisfy these needs in different ways, as this provides a perspective for studying culture. However, Stern also points out that although both Nostrand’s and Seelye’s work provide a perspective, they are not easy to apply. Hammerly (1982) suggests a mix of anthropological culture and classical culture. He highlights three areas, information culture, behavioural culture and achievement culture. Stern believes this to be useful, but says ‘it does not solve the problem of the range of cultural topics’.

Stern does however believe that there is a consensus on the objectives of teaching culture. He believes that the work of Seelye, Nostrand, Valette Robinson and Hammerly indicate the aims should be:

- knowledge about the target culture
- awareness of its characteristics and of differences between the target culture and the learner’s own country
- a research-minded outlook
- an emphasis on the understanding socio-cultural implications of language and

language use

- affective goals; interest, intellectual curiosity, and empathy.

It is difficult to criticise these objectives, however translating them into a syllabus is a difficult task and Stern's attempts to do so, I believe mainly falls into the pitfall of providing cultural tidbits. Stern believes that the consensus shows that teaching culture is 'more akin to social studies or literature' and this has resulted in a syllabus that is so broad, it seems to have become detached from its objectives.

2.2 Criticisms of Stern's suggestions for a Cultural Syllabus

A question that needs to be asked when deciding on the content of a cultural syllabus is 'Why do students need to know this?' It is difficult to see from Stern's proposed syllabus why students studying need to know about the subject areas he suggests, with the exception of two categories.

2.2.1 Places

Stern proposes 'places' as one topic area and although a broad general knowledge of the geography of the target culture would be useful, it seems difficult to justify an in depth knowledge. Stern believes that the main concern is 'to describe how the geography is perceived by native speakers' (1994:219). This seems an unattainable goal. There is no one such perception, and begs the question of whose perception is to be presented. It is also difficult to understand what aspects of geography should be concentrated on. The example Stern gives is an unconvincing explanation that in Canada it is necessary to study such expressions as 'going to the country' on the grounds that the specific meaning would not be the same in London or Sydney. Even though this might be the case it hardly seems vital information for a student to know, and certainly not enough to justify its inclusion in a cultural syllabus.

A further problem with teaching students about places is that unless they have an intrinsically interesting history or geography, students are unlikely to be interested. Should the students learning this be going to the country, then some merit in studying

about places could be justified, but if they are not, grounds for learning such information are difficult to find.

One justification for teaching such information is that if the class is conducted in English then students will learn useful vocabulary relating to describing places. Studying about real places is a distinct improvement on studying about fictitious places, which sometimes occurs in textbooks. However, this could just as easily be about any place in any country, and unless students have a particular desire to study about an English-speaking culture, then the teacher should choose an article which best lends itself to English language learning goals.

2.2.2 History

Stern also proposes 'history', and whilst it is satisfying to know the history of any country, I would argue that it is only important for a student to be aware of the history of the target culture, if it has a direct influence on everyday life and if the student is intending to visit the country. Stern does suggest this as one aspect of history that should be highlighted but also suggests historical issues from the past too. It is most likely that a more academic and in depth knowledge of any country's history could be taught more successfully in the native language rather than in English.

Stern suggests that historical antagonisms be studied, which could be a very interesting area to study, but also raises delicate issues. In the case of the UK, historical antagonism with Germany is well documented, and reading the tabloid newspapers prior to a sporting competition with Germany will show that old antagonisms are easily re-awoken. However, although there is undoubtedly an element of animosity to Germany in some sections of the community, it is debatable whether this pervades all areas of society, and difficult to know whether this should be part of a cultural syllabus. It could be argued that by articulating a prejudice it is encouraged to persist. Were the culture to be taught that of Japan, would it be right to refer to the undoubted animosity that has existed between Japan and Korea, or would doing so lead to a jaundiced view of the Japanese in the minds of the students who studied this? I imagine very few Japanese would wish such things to form a part of a

cultural syllabus on Japan, yet if Korean culture were to be studied, it is likely that most Koreans would feel that the treatment their nation has suffered at the hands of the Japanese, should be part of a cultural syllabus. As this illustrates, great sensitivity needs to be shown, for it would be very easy for a cultural syllabus to be judgemental, or to recycle historical animosities, hence preserving them.

2.2.3 Institutions

Stern also suggests 'institutions' as an area for study in the cultural syllabus, and although this could be of interest to particularly scholarly students, so should not be ruled out of a syllabus, but again, I would argue that it is not critical that students should know about them. Stern does emphasize the need to have 'an optimal mix of the learner's interests and needs' (1992:221) but also states that 'learners should familiarize themselves...to an extent that corresponds to the level of knowledge they have of similar institutions in their home country, or that corresponds to the knowledge that native speakers normally possess'. This is very difficult to assess, as it is extremely difficult to generalise at all, as each individual's knowledge will relate to their level of interest depending on which institution is being referred to. In a class environment, this would seem to suggest that students should study institutions only if they are interested in them. This does seem to make the most sense, as to compel someone to study, for example, regional government, will be a wasted exercise unless the student has a particular interest in this area. Under the broad banner of institutions, Stern lists 'the media', and although it is not imperative for students to learn about it, intuition makes one believe that students are more likely to be interested in this field as watching television and reading newspapers and the like, is something that they will do in their own culture, whereas studying the less glamorous institutions, is most probably a compulsory part of academic studies.

2.2.4 Art, music and literature

Although it is easier to imagine students being interested in this category, as a teacher I would feel uncomfortable with Stern's inclusion of teaching students about 'great figures and their achievements'. It could possibly be argued that if the students chose

the 'great figure' then it would be acceptable but this still obliges students to decide who a 'great figure' is, which seems unnecessarily prescriptive.

The two categories of Stern's not mentioned here, 'Individual persons and way of life' and 'People and society in general', are aspects that I believe should be included in a cultural syllabus.

3 Why Study Culture ?

As can be seen in the criticisms of Stern's cultural syllabus, I do not believe that it is necessary for students of English to be compelled to learn about the more classical and factual information of English speaking countries unless there is a specific reason for doing so. However this is a sweeping comment and any consideration of a cultural syllabus must be based upon why the students are studying, what their level of English is, and where they are studying.

3.1 The students' situation

If students are studying in the target culture, then there might be more justification for studying a syllabus as outlined by Stern, but this is not necessarily the case. If the students have no need or desire to learn about the target culture then there should be no attempt to teach them about it, irrespective of where the student is. Harklau in a study conducted with students who had emigrated to the States reports how teaching culture can be negative in such an environment as 'when teachers dichotomize culture they may implicitly suggest that they view American cultural perspectives and students' cultural perspectives as mutually exclusive'(1999: 117).

For students who are studying in a 'western' country, such as Holland, a cultural syllabus needs to take into account the fact that the 'way of life' culture is unlikely to be vastly different, whereas for students who are studying in very different cultures such as China, it will be extremely alien.

Similarly, the age of the students needs to be considered. If the students are teenagers, then the goal of the course may be to create an interest in the English language and

this might be best achieved by focusing upon music, fashion or sport. In Japan, many older people are interested in the more classical side of culture, and if this is the interest this should be what is in the syllabus.

The level of students' English also needs to be considered. For high level students, teaching either anthropological or classical culture would be easy to do in English. However, for lower level students, it is debatable whether analysing behavioural interaction, for example, would be possible without the class becoming so basic, as to be a waste of time.

An important factor too, is the nationality of teacher. Being from the United Kingdom, I would not feel able to teach knowledgeably, for example, about how Americans perceive their world, and why they see it in such a way. Certainly I could give my own opinion on such matters, but this would be a Briton's perception, and therefore of limited value if the goal is to study American culture. Rosaldo, quoted in Hinkel (1994:1) believes that 'those who live outside a culture, that is researchers, ethnographers, and anthropologists, cannot provide its complete interpretation because an individual's sense of self and assumptions about the world and society "ultimately depend upon one's own embeddedness within a particular socio-cultural milieu"'. As a result of this, I believe any attempt at teaching aspects relating to how and why people think as they do, is best left to the native of that culture.

3.2 Reasons for not studying 'classical' culture

There are several reasons for this belief. Firstly, it would be nearly impossible to arrange a syllabus that would be of continuing interest to an entire class of students, even though some aspects of such a syllabus would be interesting to some of the students. If a student has an interest in one area then they will have it regardless of whether it is included in the curriculum or not. It is unlikely, though not impossible, that a culture class will create a new and genuine passion. It is far more likely that students' interests in their own culture, will be the same areas of interest when studying a foreign culture. Time spent learning facts about the target culture is likely to be dull and uninspiring to the majority. Any attempt to study 'formal culture'

should be in the guise of research, where students choose a topic that interests them and prepare a project upon it.

Secondly, it seems that formal culture is not critical in ensuring that students are able to live and cope on a daily basis, should they live in the foreign culture. It could certainly be argued that such studies might enrich their stay, but as the interests would most likely be diverse, it would seem wiser that students could learn such information on their own, and in their mother-tongue, if they wish to do so.

Thirdly, to arrange an agreed syllabus, would be very difficult, as each individual will have strong feelings as to what or who, should or should not be included. Coupled with this, is the difficulty for most teachers working abroad to have a sufficiently wide access to materials, which would make such studying a satisfactory experience. A related, though less important point, is that the individual teacher will need not only to be knowledgeable, but also enthusiastic, to motivate the student, and a syllabus which is of little interest to the teacher, will most probably be badly presented.

In an age when there is a debate about the dangers of 'linguistic imperialism' (according to Crystal (1997:5), English is spoken by between 1.2 and 1.5 billion people) any attempt to compel students to study the formal culture of English speaking countries needs to be strongly questioned. Holliday (1994:3) believes that, 'the unilateral professionalism, which has carried English language education across the world...is ethnocentric, failing to appreciate the social backgrounds of others, using international English language education to feed its own expansionism'.

Teaching the formal culture of English speaking nations in a positive light, could be construed as an attempt to convert non-native English speakers into embracing not just the language, but also the way of life of English speaking nations too. For this reason alone, any attempt to teach culture to non-native speakers by native speakers of English, should be about 'culture with a small c', not 'culture with a capital C', unless it is studied as an elected subject.

There is too big a danger that if culture were to be taught in terms of the achievements of the foreign culture that the native English speaker would appear to be bragging, which could turn students away from English. It could also be awkward for native speakers to talk about their own culture in terms of its achievements for the same reason. Furthermore it also needs to be pointed out that some native TEFL teachers living abroad, do become negative towards the 'host country' and fall into the trap of comparing the host country unfavourably to their own, so any cultural syllabus would need to be clearly defined regarding the tone of how it is to be represented.

4 Content of the 'Cultural syllabus'

As indicated in the criticisms of Stern's proposed cultural syllabus, I do not believe that it is worthwhile to oblige students to study the formal culture of another society unless they have a keen interest in learning about such aspects.

The key criteria, which should be the basis for deciding upon the content of a cultural syllabus, is that the culture studied should enable the student to live in the foreign culture, safely and with as much ease as possible. This I would regard as the most important, and although it might seem rather patronising, as a teacher, the main priority should be the welfare of the student. There will of course be students who enjoy the excitement of finding out for themselves everything about the foreign culture, including its dangerous aspects, but they are most likely to be the minority. Even for students who have no intention of visiting the foreign culture, this should be the central part of a cultural syllabus, as not only would it provide useful information should they have a change of plan, but by studying the current 'deep culture' they could develop a better insight to human behaviour, in general.

Individual persons and way of life

Stern himself says that this topic area 'is perhaps in many ways the most

important'(1992:220). Personal contact, as Stern says, will help make to make the language a living reality, but he also stresses that it is important not to generalize on the basis of one person or a small group. Depending on where the classes are taking place, it may not be possible to meet a native speaker, other than the teacher (if a native speaker), so it is important for the teacher to provide balanced insights whenever possible. However, this problem is not insurmountable. Depending on the available technology, television, video, radio, magazines, newspapers can help reveal everyday life in the target culture.

For students to get a broad sense of how people live in the target culture, all of these mediums portray a variety of people in their typical environment. It is not even necessary for television and video for students to be able to understand what is being said. A wealth of information about such things as housing, diet, transportation, past-times, the environment is instantly accessible by viewing. For these aspects of everyday life nearly any programme or movie would suffice, for other aspects, genuine footage would be preferable.

The greater the diversity of people represented, the harder it will be for students to make superficial judgements, about what constitutes the culture of another country. As regards eating habits, rather than informing students that the British eat 'fish and chips' or a 'Sunday roast', students could see for themselves that the diversity of food consumed, is almost too broad to generalise. Linda Harklau (1999:110) notes that 'Culture is an elusive construct that shifts constantly over time and according to who is perceiving and interpreting it'. The problem with current representations of culture in English language textbooks, is precisely this; culture has evolved but it is easier to continue with outdated beliefs that conform with widely held stereotypes. It would be interesting to discover if curry, hamburgers or pizza, were more frequently consumed than 'traditional' British food.

Under this heading, Stern also includes customs and expectations, 'such as the etiquette of removing shoes on entering a house, or eating behaviour at a meal'(1992:220). These are vital for students to know if they wish to avoid causing

offence through ignorance. It is important that these customs are real, current and generally adhered to, rather than belonging just to one socio-economic group. Vallete (1977) includes 'unfamiliar conventions such as writing a cheque or reading a timetable'. Whilst these might seem mundane, knowledge of them will smooth the path of a visitor to the country.

People and society in general

In this category Stern says; 'The learner should be led to identify significant groups indicative of social, professional, economic, and age differences, as well as those which reflect regional characteristics'. I would agree that students should be exposed to all of these groups, but do not think it is beneficial for the students to 'identify them' as this encourages students to label individuals on the basis of one criteria, which can lead to false generalisations. Stern believes that 'it is not necessary to undertake an 'objective' enquiry in the manner of a sociologist or anthropologist', but it is surely beneficial for students to form their own opinions about an array of individuals rather than to classify them, by what can be arbitrary divisions.

Stern continues by listing a host of questions, that these social groups could be asked, which would provide a plethora of views and opinions. These would indeed provide a wide spectrum of views, which would exist within any culture, but rather than predetermining which kind of people hold which views, students should be encouraged to form their own opinions. In all cultures there will be a variety of people, both rich and poor, young and old, professional and non-professional, and all living in different regions. Students can be encouraged to look for not just differences, but also similarities with their own culture.

Natural interaction

Ron Scollon (1999:182) argues for case for how television sitcoms can be used 'to analyse and illustrate cultural differences in patterns of conversational openings'. His article documents not simply the language exchanged, but also the expected reactions of the participants. Personally, I would prefer to see real exchanges used, as sitcoms,

which are scripted, are as vulnerable to inaccuracy as a teacher is, in scripting dialogues for class to practice. There is a danger that the sitcoms will not truly reflect what happens in such an exchange, and as there are many 'fly on the wall' documentaries around, these would show what really happens when people meet.

Metaphor, discourse markers, taboo and implicatures

These are areas of 'culture' that relate more directly with the teaching of English as a Foreign/Second Language, and as such can be more easily justified for inclusion in a cultural syllabus. Lantolph (1999:42) cites Danesi who states that metaphorical competence is 'closely linked to the ways in which a culture organizes its world conceptually' and Pollio et al who 'estimate that the ordinary native English speaker creates approximately three thousand metaphors a week'. As an example he writes that 'Thanks for your time' reflects that in American culture 'time is money'.

Lawrence Bouton (1999:47-70) has conducted a study on non-native speakers understanding the implication of an utterance. Whilst this might seem rather patronising to suggest that non native speakers can not work out such implications, or as Swan (1984:11) says 'to treat the learner as a linguistically gifted idiot', Bouton makes a good case for including this in a cultural syllabus, especially where the implicature is related to humour, in particular to sarcasm and irony.

Conclusion

Determining a cultural syllabus in ESL/EFL programmes is fraught with difficulties. Although it might be possible to agree on the objectives of a syllabus, how these are to be fulfilled, is not as easy to reach. Not least of the problems is that any syllabus has to be based upon a particular class, not the learner in general, as there is no such idealised creature. The needs and interests of the actual students should be paramount in deciding a cultural syllabus.

A further difficulty is in limiting the scope of the proposed culture class. I believe that the question 'Why should students learn about this ?' needs to be asked about each

suggested component of the syllabus. There is nothing about English speaking cultures that demands inclusion in any syllabus over any other culture, apart from the relation it has to the students ability to learn the English language.

Douglas-Brown (1994:165) writes that;

‘A language is part of a culture and culture is part of language; the two are intricately interwoven so that one cannot separate the two without losing the significance of either language or culture’.

This may well be true, but every effort needs to be made to strip away the surplus culture and find those aspects which have a direct and obvious link to language, or the subject matter becomes too vast and unwieldy.

Douglas-Brown also writes that (1994:164) ‘ there is... a tendency for us to believe that our own reality is the “correct” perception.....What appears to you to be an accurate and objective perception of a person, a custom, an idea, is sometimes “jaded” or “stilted” in the view of someone from another culture.’ I believe that this could be extended to people within the same culture too. In writing this essay, I have found it impossible to be ‘objective’ and to lose my own biases and prejudices as to how students should learn. Consequently, the task of designing a cultural syllabus that is not ‘wrong’ in the eyes of someone is a thankless task. This problem highlights the dangers involved in teaching culture, and as such I feel that it would be best to omit it completely from an EFL/ESL programme.

An added difficulty is that even if the content of a syllabus could be agreed upon, teachers would need special training before attempting to teach such a syllabus. Without training, it is possible that attempts at teaching culture could be more divisive and detrimental to opinions formed by students, than if no attempt were made to deal with the topic at all.