Classroom Focus: The U.S. Midwest

Teaching Culture in Adult ESL: Pedagogical and Ethical Considerations

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Abstract

Several scholars have criticized ESL language pedagogy that promotes western values. They caution against using approaches that are hegemonic and ultimately self-serving. This issue is most salient in the area of teaching culture to adult ESL learners. Despite criticism, teachers of adult ESL find that teaching culture is part of the adult ESL program. This article examines the ethical and pedagogical dimensions of teaching culture to adult ESL learners. Results of a qualitative study of an adult ESL program and its approach to culture in the classroom are presented. Findings show that while some criticisms may be warranted, teaching culture is believed to be important to communicative competence, and teachers and students acknowledge this.

Introduction

Experienced teachers of adult English as a Second Language (ESL) know that learning about culture is part of learning English. Adult ESL learners themselves understand that language learning consists of more than the ability to understand new linguistic structures. Indeed, the coding and decoding of communicative acts requires an understanding and appreciation of the cultural context in which they occur.

Yet criticisms and words of caution by Auerbach (1993), Canagarajah (1999), Phillipson (1993), and Skutnabb-Kangas (2000) regarding the teaching of culture should not be overlooked. These scholars have criticized ELT professionals and materials alike for their hegemonic tendencies, particularly in their representations of the target culture. They claim many ESL pedagogical practices are hegemonic in that mainstream American and British cultures are

portrayed as dominant and superior to the culture of the second language (L2) student. The ramifications of these criticisms go beyond simply being culturally sensitive; they can affect acquisition efficacy and ultimately the proficiency levels attained in the second language.

Learners are affected in their language acquisition by their perception of the target culture. If a language learner perceives the target culture as well as his native culture in positive terms, then proficiency in the L2 is enhanced (Brown, 2000). However, as Schumann (1976) notes, there are two possible "bad" language-learning situations in regards to cultural perceptions. If an L2 learners perceive the target culture as dominant or if the L2 learners perceive their own culture in competition with the target culture, then acquisition will be hindered.

Unfortunately, teaching culture necessitates exclusionary practices that could be interpreted as hegemonic. In much the same way that teaching English requires a program or instructor typically to choose a particular language model (American, British, Indian, etc.) to the exclusion of others, teaching culture requires that only parts of the target culture be included. Instructors lack time and expertise to include all relevant aspects (if it were even possible to determine what all the relevant aspects were). The dilemma then for ESL teachers is to include and integrate culture in their language curriculum without hegemonizing. But, how does an instructor discuss culture without imposing it? This study examines how one adult ESL program addresses this question by presenting the results of a qualitative study.

This article has two purposes. One is to describe and discuss ethnographic data relating how one adult language-learning program approaches culture in the classroom. The second purpose, and perhaps more germane in the present political climate, is an exploration in ways in which individual instructors in this program at times cross and at other times respect the ethical boundary between cultural lessons and hegemony.

To be sure, avoiding hegemony is perplexing when giving "cultural lessons." While, as previously mentioned, Auerbach (1994), Canagarajah (1999), Phillips (1994), Skutnabb-Gangas (2000) and others criticize ESL professionals for imposing western values through language teaching, they offer few practical guidelines for approaching culture in the classroom. In the absence of specific research-based and practical guidelines about teaching culture, teachers are left to teach culture as they deem appropriate. Though well intentioned, some elements of their cultural lessons and their rationale for including them may be open to criticisms. On the other hand, students themselves yearn for cultural lessons that will assist them in their acquisition of English. Thus students often see cultural lessons not as an imposition, and thus hegemonic, but rather as a set of guidelines that help them use English in real-world and culturally imbued contexts.

Description of Research Site

This study took place at Solid Oaks ESL School for Adults (a pseudonym) located in a married student housing (MSH) complex on the campus a large Midwestern American research university. Solid Oaks serves a unique population. The students, many of whom have a college degree, are primarily spouses (typically female) of full-time graduate students.

A key to understanding the environment at Solid Oaks is the competing notions of how best to teach English. Because of their strong academic preparation in their native countries, the ESL students have definite notions of how a language program should function, including what role culture should play in the curriculum. There is some tension at the school and some student attrition because teachers and students do not always agree on how classes should be conducted or what should be part of the curriculum. The issue of culture is a point of contention.

Another key to understanding this language school is to appreciate the frustration that many international residents feel in their new environment. The spouses who are full-time students spend many hours in the laboratory or in the library while their spouses stay at home. Often the spouses, who are not a university students, cannot work due to visa restrictions and/or limited English proficiency. Thus, they often spend many hours a day in isolation from the rest of the university community. In addition, the housing complex is looked down upon by many in the university community. In a report prepared by an independent consultant who evaluated the housing complex, it was noted that among some members of the university community, the married student housing complex is known as the "international ghetto." In short, the residents of this housing complex suffer from the hardships of moving to a new place, the familial pressures of being graduate students, economic difficulties, prejudice, and isolation. Solid Oaks School was founded in direct response to these frustrations. The Director of the housing complex, who was instrumental in the opening the school, maintains that he has always been worried about the spouses of international graduate students because they do not seem to have constructive enterprises. In the spring of 1988, he asked his Chinese graduate assistant what he could do for the international residents and the answer was, "start a language school." As a result, in the fall of 1988, the ESL School was started and continues today. The school's original mission according to an early brochure was:

> [to] combine practical experience with classroom activities to assist
> the student in overcoming language barriers and to develop the four
> basic language skills: listening, speaking, reading and writing.
> Students in the Language School will prepare themselves to live, work
> and study in the United States. (Solid Oaks ESL brochure)

Solid Oaks has approximately 150 students, with Korean, Chinese, and Latin American being the three major groups. It has 15 courses ranging from beginning to advanced levels. The courses are designed to not only help students learn English, but also understand American culture, make friends, and give structure

to the students' day.

This class policy statement is typical of the approaches that teachers take in teaching their classes:

The objectives of this course will be to develop the speaking, listening, reading and writing skills of students. Learning activities will include areas that relate to the students' needs: material about the American culture will be a part of the course. The class will also serve a social need, as it will be a source of friendships as well as a learning experience.

Methodology

Ethnography was a chosen as a research paradigm to investigate this ESL program because it allows a holistic view of the educational context and in particular, ethnography can capture how the issue of culture is addressed in the classrooms. Hornberger (1994), Johnson (1992), van Lier (1988), and Watson-Gegeo (1988) have advocated the use of ethnographic research particularly in adult ESL because quantitative research methods often fail to capture student and teacher interactions. As Johnson points out, "There is surprisingly little ethnographic work on the language learning and cultural adjustment of adolescents and adults relative to the many experimental and correlational studies" (1992, p. 135). Since investigating the teaching and perception of culture is the central issue, ethnography is the logical research paradigm in that it allows for an understanding of the rationale behind the teaching decisions and how the curriculum and presentation is perceived by students.

In the case of Solid Oaks ESL School, I collected and analyzed data to find what Agar (1996) refers to as "rich points." Rich points are those actions, comments, or traditions that are particularly revelatory of the educational environment. Rich points allow the ethnographer to develop a "thick description" (Geertz, 1973, p. 6) of the environment which "exposes [the] normalness without reducing [the] particularity" (Geertz, 1973, p. 14).

Watson-Gegeo notes that perhaps a better term for language acquisition would be "language socialization because...when we learn a second language, we are learning more than a structure for communication; we are also learning social and cultural norms, procedures for interpretation and forms of reasoning" (1988, p. 582). Learning the language then means learning the native culture and being communicatively competent, which depends not only on the grammaticality of speech, but also on its contextual appropriateness.

In order to develop a thick description of the Solid Oaks and its approach to the culture question, it was necessary to identify informants who know the school environment well. Spradley and McCurdy (1972) note that it is critical to have informants who are *encultured:* informants who know the environment well and are able to describe it. When selecting teachers, this was a simple task. Four teachers--Miriam, Judy, Stacy, and Heidi--have each been at Solid Oaks for over

eight years, and helped create the curriculum for the school. In addition to these four teachers, six other teachers have been at the school for shorter periods of time. While they had some revealing insights, richer data came from formal interviews with the instructors with longer tenure.

Identifying encultured students was more difficult. Since each student comes to the school with a different background and set of goals, it was not easy to identify "typical" students. But I identified groups of students who shared some common characteristics and interviewed students from each of these groups.

First and most important are the female students who are in the community because their husbands are full-time graduate students. The majority of students at the school are from this group. However, two other groups make up a very important component of the school. Many graduate students and visiting scholars, whose main work revolves around the university, come to the school to "brush up" on their English. There are also relatives of the families living in MSH who come to visit for several months. I interviewed students from each of these groups as well. In addition to teachers and students, I interviewed the Director of MSH.[1]

In the data collection procedures, two questions were used as theoretical backdrop to explore cultural issues in Solid Oaks' curriculum, and how culture is used to help students in their communicative endeavors. The first was: *How do the instructors teach culture so that their adult students have more than a linguistic understanding of English?* The subsequent question problematizes the first: *How do the teachers decide what aspects of American culture should be taught and how do students react to these decisions?* In other words, given limited class contact time, how do teachers decide which elements should be taught, and do students agree with these decisions?

The study consisted of interviews with all teachers, three focus group interviews with students, interviews with individual students, fifteen class observations, and document analysis. The focus groups were done with the three different majority ethnic groups of the school: Korean, Chinese and Latin American. All interviews and class observations were recorded, transcribed, and coded.

After collecting the data, I coded the 300 pages of transcripts, the field notes and the documents, using several categories. Below I list and briefly explain the codes. All interview comments and classroom observations were then categorized to allow for comparing and contrasting. The first two codes are teacher-centered while the second two are student-centered.

1. teaching/learning of American culture

   This code involved comparing teacher comments in interviews and classroom decisions that reflected their understanding of the place of culture in their curricular decisions.

2. L2 teaching/learning beliefs

> This code dealt with teacher's view of how an understanding of the target culture would enhance language acquisition.

3. language learning goals

> This code dealt with the specific language goals of students and how culture was viewed as part or not part of this overall goal.

4. student attrition

> There are several factors that lead to student attrition. This code was was used to analyze how culture teaching might affect the rate of attrition.

The first step in the analysis was to use the data to provide an accurate description of the program (Patton, 1990). Comparing and contrasting comments from informants as well as noting actions of the informants regarding these categories accomplished this part of the analysis. Patton notes that in analysis, qualitative researchers can use a case analysis or a cross-case analysis (1990). A case analysis is used when the researcher writes a case study for each person interviewed. A cross-case analysis consists of "grouping together answers from different people to common questions or analyzing different perspectives on central issues" (Patton, 1990, p. 376). For this study, I deemed a cross-case analysis more appropriate because students at the school vary considerably in their backgrounds and their expectations from the program. In order to highlight the diversity and commonalities with respect to the major attributes of the program, a cross-case analysis was the best choice.

Before discussing the results, there is one final element: a definition of culture. From the outset, it became apparent that students and teachers are at times working under different conceptions of culture. Teachers are operating under a definition of culture as being what has been labeled culture with a "capital *C*." This would include elements such as holidays, religious traditions, and important historical figures. Students, on the other hand, hold this view but also see culture with a "lower-case *c*" which includes such elements as day-to-day living, colloquial expressions, accepting or receiving gifts, etc. When I conducted interviews and focus groups, I never explicitly defined culture. Rather, I intentionally left the definition of culture open so as to gather different sorts of responses. I would occasionally offer a few examples if there was a need for clarity, but I left the definition open as much as possible so the informants could guide me on a "verbal tour" (Spradley & McCurdy, 1972) of what their experiences and understanding of culture learning at Solid Oaks.

Results

While school-wide policies affect classroom and curricular decisions, culture has

not been a topic of discussion at the programmatic level at this ESL program for some time. Culture was a founding principle of the school, in order to help students adjust to their new surroundings, but it is typically not included as a topic of discussion in any staff meetings. As such, teachers are left to incorporate culture as they see fit. And most teachers do include some elements of culture into their courses. In their views, they are remaining true to the original mission of the school which, according to one of the school's founders, is to help newly arriving students to orient themselves to U.S. culture.

However, students view the school's mission differently. As one Chinese student said, "I think there should be some culture if it helps you understand, but mostly English." This difference in understanding of the role of culture is a theme in the data. To highlight other themes, I divided the data below into three areas:

1. necessity of teaching culture
2. teacher and student comments
3. teacher and student actions

The Necessity of Teaching Culture

The teachers believe that culture is essential for adult ESL students, but note that it involves a different pedagogical process from teaching language. Success or failure of a particular course often depends on how a teacher approaches the cultural elements in the curriculum. If culture is well integrated into the course, attrition (a constant worry among all the teachers) remains lower, in their opinion, although this evidence is anecdotal.

As previously pointed out, the teaching of culture is seen as integral to school's mission. Several teachers who spend time discussing culture indicated that they discuss "mainstream elements" such as food, holidays, and clothing. They believe that any part of American culture is essential in the students' education and acculturation process. The teachers believe that with this knowledge, students will be better able to interact in the community and communicate more effectively.

Students expressed a similar feeling--that classes should include some cultural component, but their reasoning was somewhat different. They want explicit cultural lessons only as they relate to increasing proficiency. As one student said, "I am not concerned about culture except that it helps me know English. I think there should be some culture, but mostly English. Understand English more easily." The students appear much less overtly concerned about acclimating and more concerned with learning English.

Teacher and Student Comments

Six of the teachers at the school are under the age of thirty, while the other four are over fifty. I highlight this age division among the teachers because it appears

relevant in how culture is addressed in the classroom. All ten teachers were formally interviewed, and I also listened to what the teachers said in staff meetings and in the hallways. Their comments reveal a surprising division between the older and younger teachers. The four older teachers consider teaching culture as a more essential part of the school's mission, while the younger teachers expressed more reservations about their pedagogical approach to culture. The older teachers did not express such reservations. In fact, the older teachers commented on several occasions that while teaching English is important, an equally important role for them is to be "American ambassadors": helping students adjust and adapt to American culture. As Judy, one of the older teachers, said:

> I'll say to them, "When you go back to your country, people aren't going to say, did you use the past tense correctly?" They are going to want to know what are Americans like. What did you do when you were there?' So, to me that is really one of the goals of our school...to try to offer and expose them to as much of our culture as we possibly can.

When I asked Judy which aspect of culture she taught or how she approached it, she commented that food was central. "One day I brought in a recipe for apple pie. You know as American as apple pie."

There is an ethical dilemma in discussing culture that all the teachers acknowledged, particularly the younger teachers. One of the younger teachers noted that she rarely focuses on American culture because she fears if that is the focus, then students will reject American culture altogether. Another younger teacher noted that when she discusses culture, she tries to avoid making America "seem better" than other nations. "I won't make America out to be the mightiest and the best. I try to compare and contrast it with other cultures."

Several students said they like learning about American popular culture because it helps them understand what Americans are talking about. It also helps them to follow television shows that they watch in order to practice their listening skills. However, in a focus group the overriding sentiment of the participants was that while it is interesting to learn about American culture, spending too much time on culture would deprive them of valuable opportunities to practice their English. This was their only opportunity to learn English because once they returned to their country they would not be able to practice anymore.

Actions of Students and Teachers

Because actions often reveal more about underlying attitudes than interviews, I completed fifteen classroom observations in order to see how the school community reacted in regards to the teaching of culture. While the older teachers, younger teachers, and learners all had definitive views on culture in their interviews, their actions in class reveal a greater acknowledgment of the

centrality of culture in learning a new language. The teachers often began class announcing various activities in the community that students might want to attend. For instance, Judy announced that there would be a lighting of the Christmas tree downtown and she encouraged students to go so that, "You can get into the Christmas spirit." The class was made up of entirely Chinese and Korean learners, and despite the fact that many may not have been Christian, they appeared not to be offended. (In fact, a few minutes later, several Chinese students asked Judy what happened at a Catholic Mass during Christmas time.) On one occasion, Judy brought in two worksheets that dealt with Christmas. One dealt with Christmas from a religious viewpoint and one dealt with Christmas from a secular viewpoint. The worksheet that dealt with the religious aspects prompted more discussion.

During this same class period, as a vocabulary-building activity, Judy had the students read poems about different kinds of love. One of the poems dealt with how parents who love their children have to let them go to find their way in the world. One of the students commented that her mother had always encouraged her to leave home early. Judy responded by saying, "Oh, how wonderful that she encouraged you to go out on your own." While this is a simple statement, it reveals much about Judy's attitude towards children becoming independent from their parents. Students in the class did not have any noticeable reaction, but they heard one American's attitude concerning this subject. Judy told me later that she uses the same set of poems each year and that one year a student read a love poem about a husband and wife. The student reacted to the poem by saying that she had an arranged marriage and was not sure that her husband loved her. Judy responded by saying, "Oh, I'm sure he loves you." Judy was not being insensitive. She was simply at a loss to know what to say, because arranged marriages was a cultural phenomenon with which she was unfamiliar.

Pamela, the youngest teacher, discussed personalities in her classroom as part of a lesson on adjectival usage. When the students described a man in a picture as a work-a-holic, Pamela confirmed the correct adjectival usage and then went on to comment, "Yeah, he's a work-a-holic and usually that is bad because he's boring and people don't like to be around someone like that." This is another simple teacher comment, but it gives a clear picture to students about how Americans feel (or at least this one American feels) about this kind of personality.

Several of the older teachers have an English-only rule in place in their classes, which reveals teachers' views on language acquisition and in Auerbach's (1993) opinion hegemonic tendencies. In this case, any few words in the students' native language are viewed as a step backwards on the path to English proficiency. Also, Judy commented how rude she thought it was to leave a student out if this student did not speak the native language of the group. I do not feel as though Judy was hegemonic, but rather being faithful to her view of language acquisition and politeness. The younger teachers do not have an English-only rule and feel that it is unnecessary, because a word or two in Chinese during class is not felt

to be disruptive and they believe it often can help communication if one student can explain some concept or word to another student in their native language.

Students, for their part, bring in many questions that are cultural in nature. Students ask about what goes on at religious ceremonies. When the phrase "a kiss on the first date" came up in class, students were intrigued and wanted a complete explanation of what was behind that phrase. These few examples illustrate that the students at Solid Oaks frequently have "culture" questions. While students say they come to the ESL School for English, they relish the opportunity to ask these cultural questions of a native speaker in a safe and friendly environment. Are teachers affected and influenced by these questions? They appear to sense the students' eagerness for explanations and explainin depth some of these cultural elements.

Conclusion

So what do these comments and actions reveal about the place of culture in this ESL program? First, at Solid Oaks and in most ESL programs, the teaching of culture is unavoidable. Even those teachers who claim to not teach culture, in the final analysis, are doing it implicitly or through prompting from students. Teaching culture is indeed part of this program and a significant amount of time is spent explaining American traditions and fielding questions from students about the events and behaviors they have observed. As for those classes in which teachers intentionally incorporate culture as part of their curriculum, for the most part, more lively class discussions result.

Second, these teachers approach culture with no conscious hegemonic intent; they simply are teaching concepts that they deem important for communication. How do teachers know what aspects to teach? In part, they are driven by their own sense of the students' needs as well as their questions. Teachers use a variety of language learning activities to improve proficiency and these cultural elements are viewed as vehicles to this end. Even so, teachers should be sensitive about comments they make that relate to cultural values that might run counter to the values held by students. I think it significant that the younger teachers say they avoid teaching but do teach culture implicitly or in response to direct questions. I think an argument could be made that younger ESL teachers were educated in acclimate where diversity and sensitivity were more commonplace and this influences their teaching. This would certainly be an area to explore in future research.

Finally, and perhaps most significantly, I observed students and teachers "forget" they were studying a language when cultural issues arose in class. If forgetting is a sign of internalizing a new language and if culture is a means to do this, perhaps it is not hegemonic to use it, but rather pedagogically sound.

Notes

[1] When the research began, I was the Director of Solid Oaks ESL program. The Director sets the teaching schedule, opens mail, and holds bimonthly meetings to discuss current issues. Directors of the school rarely set curriculum policies. However, being Director did allow me to see the day-to-day operation of the program, which was invaluable in data collection.

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