CULTURE IN ESP SYLLABUS: WHY AND HOW

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Abstract: While language and culture are generally recognised to be intimately linked, English for Specific Purposes has typically been seen as "acultural". This paper argues that cultural information is a necessary component of any ESP course and that a contrastive-comparative approach can help the learner in appropriating other cultures.
Keywords: contrastive-comparative approach, cultural awareness, English for Specific Purposes, intercultural communication

1. Introduction

Whereas it is generally recognised nowadays that language and culture are intimately linked, the teaching of English for Specific Purposes (ESP) has typically been seen as divorced from cultural input. This paper argues that cultural information is a necessary component of any ESP course, but that the teaching methods used must take into account the complex nature of culture as well as students' needs.

Starting out from the basic postulates of ESP, the paper looks at learners' needs and refutes the idea historically present in the field that ESP is essentially "acultural" (Bower 1992). Once the need to include culture as part of language teaching in professional contexts is established, the paper addresses the issue of which (type of) culture should be included, focussing on "little c" culture and the interplay of the source and target cultures. In this respect, the necessity to "appropriate" (Kramsch 1998), rather than adopt, the foreign culture is stressed; appropriation will ideally further promote language proficiency as well as openness to yet other cultures.

Based on these theoretical premises, the comparative-contrastive approach (Byram, Morgan et al. 1994) is discussed as a possible method of including culture in ESP classes. Finally, a case study of a course of English for Civil Engineers at the University of Ljubljana is presented, together with the positive feedback received by the students involved.

2. Needs Analysis

It is a distinctive trait of ESP that teaching and materials are founded on the results of needs analysis:

> The first questions when starting preparation for teaching an ESP course is almost always: What do students need to do with English? Which of the skills do they need to master and how well? Which genres do they need to master, either for comprehension or production purposes? (Dudley-Evans 2001:131)

In the development of a Language for Specific Purposes (LSP) course, much attention is consequently paid to the specific vocabulary of the discipline, often accompanied by a limited focus on some grammar topics that often occur in the genres most typically encountered by the students (e.g. traits of academic language). Additional training in some aspects of general language useful in most everyday professional situations is typically included as well, but very rarely does one hear of culture being incorporated in the LSP syllabus.

Besides the fact that cultural and intercultural aspects of the field are usually given less significance in LSP in general, English is a world language that can frequently be expected to be used by students as a *lingua franca*, i.e. in communication with non-native speakers of English, rather than to interact with native English speakers (cf. Nickerson 2005). Some authors even take this to be a prominent characteristic of ESP: "In the majority of cases, interactions take place among people of different nationalities using English as an international language for communication" (López Torres and Perea Barberá 2002:75).

On the side of the workplace and professions, intercultural communication awareness training has been implemented since the 1970's because the need for it arose from multicultural work situations, although it has remained relatively marginal (Roberts 1998:119). It is argued here that cultural material should be included in the ESP syllabus because it does form part of what the learners need, even if this necessity is often overlooked. This is hardly surprising as "[l]earners are not aware of their own language requirements, and external observers (e.g. textbook writers and applied linguists) have only experience and intuition to guide them" (Strevens 1977:107).

3. (Un)desirability of Culture

For a long time, ESP was to some degree seen as "free of culture": ESP was supposed to be "a conception of teaching and learning the practical command of a language, unrelated to aspects of culture" (Strevens 1977:89), and Bower (1992:29-30), for example, described English at the international level as "essentially acultural" with a "universal functional value". Some of the practitioners in the field even felt culture had a negative connotation. The English language was desired

> not for the purpose of spreading British or American social and cultural values but as a natural link within multi-cultural, multi-lingual societies as a vehicle for international communication, as a global carrier-wave for news, information, entertainment and administration, and as the language in which

[had] taken place the genesis of the second industrial and scientific revolution. (attributed to Strevens (1977:89) in Master and Brinton 1998:vii)

It has thus been claimed in language teaching that there is a strong dichotomy between language and culture, and the latter has at times been seen as "contents conveyed by language, but separate from language" (Penz 2001:103). Such an assertion cannot hold because of the interaction between cultural awareness and language awareness, which are "both seen as essential aspects of communicative competence and inseparable from it" (Fenner 2001:7). In reality, quite the opposite is true: "Since language and culture are inseparable, we cannot be teachers of language without being teachers of culture – or vice versa" (Byram, Morgan et al. 1994:vii).

In Europe and worldwide, the question of language and culture teaching – also known as intercultural communication, intercultural communicative competence, *Fremdverstehen* ("understanding the Other"), intercultural studies, or multiculturalism – has become particularly prominent in the third millennium, and this fact is also reflected in the great number of publications and endorsements by Unesco, the Council of Europe and EU institutions (e.g. Council of Europe 2008, European Union 2007, Unesco 2003; cf. Penz 2001:104). The main concern here is the possibility of miscommunication as studies of interethnic communication suggest that lack of shared schemas in interaction is more likely to lead to communication breakdown than differences at the level of linguistic code (Ellis and Roberts 1987:24 as cited in Byram, Morgan et al. 1994:8; cf. Grosman 1998).

4. Which Culture?

The literature typically distinguishes between Culture with a "big C" and culture with a "little c". Traditional study of British and American/Canadian life and institutions has placed emphasis on "big C" or "achievement" culture – history, geography, institutions, literature, art and music – at the expense of "little c", "behaviour" or "behavioural" culture, which includes cultural behaviours, culturally-influenced beliefs and perceptions (cf. Čurković Kalebić 1998, Stern 1992, Strevens 1977, Tomalin and Stempleski 1993). It is the latter, however, that seems to be of greater importance for ESP courses.

Among ESP practitioners, the relevance of "behaviour culture" has been most widely recognised in the field of Business Studies (cf. Heinzová 1999, Kramsch 2001). Out of the six case studies of ESP for language learners in the university presented in Orr (2002) only one – for students of business – mentions culture, acknowledging that "[a] critical approach to cultural issues informs nearly every aspect of the program" (Boyd 2002:53).

But it is not only the target culture that needs to be taken into account. The cultural component of any language course – including those for specific purposes – will be important at both societal and individual levels. The language learner, who is in the case of LSP a current or future professional in the field, must also be able in his or her professional life to play the role of a cultural intermediary, and this must be taken into account in the management of the relations between the learner's country and that of the target language (cf. Byram and Zarate 1997). Interestingly, the problems created by differences in behaviours

in intercultural communication may not be very different from those encountered in communication among ethnically diverse groups within one and the same country (cf. Kramsch 2001).

At the level of the individual, one of the educational purposes of foreign language teaching is "to develop pupils' understanding of themselves and their own culture" (DES 1990:3 as cited in Byram, Morgan et. al. 1994:43). In this respect, the value of language and culture teaching is that it can contribute to this educational purpose as it provides learners with a perspective on themselves from beyond the usual limits of their experience and perceptions. An aspect of the cultural dimension of foreign language learning will accordingly refer to the learner himself or herself, i.e. the learner "as a cultural being with a cultural perspective on the world, including culture-specific expectations of the classroom and learning processes" (Wajnryb 1992:40; cf. Nero 2009).

5. Appropriation instead of Adoption

Teaching a foreign culture does not mean "infecting" learners with it nor does it imply cultural conversion:

> Learners cannot simply shake off their own culture and step into another. It is not a question of putting down their "cultural baggage" […] Learners are "committed" to their culture and to deny any part of it is to deny something within their own being. (Byram, Morgan et al. 1994:43)

This does not mean they will not try it: "[Language learners'] desire to learn the language of others is often coupled with a desire to behave and think like them, in order to ultimately be recognized and validated by them" (Kramsch 1998:80-81; cf. Grosman 1998). Apart from being unrealistic, such a prospect is less than advantageous. The notion of authenticity is suspect in itself as there is necessarily a diversity of authenticities present within any one national society and what is authentic in one context might be inauthentic in another: in the complexities of a post-colonial, global age with its multiple, shifting identities, "native" and "foreign" cultures cannot be seen as stable spaces on the map and permanent in time or reduced to a limited set of cultural traits (cf. Holliday 2010a, Holliday, Hyde and Kullman 2006:21-25, 54-59, Kramsch 1998:81, 2001:202, 205), and this is particularly true of English-speaking cultures as English is the leading international language (cf. Alptekin 2002, Bhatia 1996, Prodromou 1992).

Even more important, however, is "the undesirability of imposing on learners a concept of authenticity that might devalue their own authentic selves *as learners*" (Kramsch 1998:81). Kramsch argues that cultural appropriateness may need to be replaced by the concept of *appropriation*. This process goes beyond adopting a foreign language and culture: learners make it their own by adapting it to their own needs and interests. The goal to be striven for is therefore the ability to acquire another person's language and understand someone else's culture while retaining one's own. Encouraging appropriation means trying to avoid both extremes: on the one hand, cultural pluralism may lead to a crisis of meaning and

alienation (cf. Berger and Luckmann 1995); on the other, one might develop representations of an "idealised Self" and "demonised Other" (cf. Holliday 2010b).

Interestingly, language teachers teaching a language that is not their mother tongue might have an advantage over native language teachers in this respect, and not just in the sense of being able to point out cultural differences straightforwardly to homogeneous classes (cf. Medgyes 1994): far from being "culturally deficient" (cf. Holliday 2009), they know from their own experience what it means to enter a new, foreign culture with its own set of customs, values and assumptions (cf. Rowsell, Sztainbok and Blaney 2007).

6. Some Additional Benefits

As Johnson and Nelson's (2010) study shows, students who do not achieve proficiency may nevertheless experience transformative learning, i.e. even students whose level is relatively low can benefit from cultural instruction in terms of awareness of diversity and ethnocentricity. It is the converse relation, however, that is even more interesting: research done by Jiang, Green, Henley and Masten (2009) has shown that acculturation, understood as getting closer to the target culture without separation from the learner's ethnic society, has a beneficial influence on learners' proficiency. Consequently, incorporating culture into an ESP course may have a greater impact than just reaching goals related to cultural knowledge.

It is an important characteristic of developing intercultural interaction competence in an ESP context that the aim is profession-related rather than generally educational. Spencer-Oatey and Franklin (2009:202) believe that the beneficiaries of promoting competence in intercultural interaction are "the individual participant and his/her *organization* (or other users of his/her professional qualifications) rather than the individual and *society*".

The societal level cannot be disregarded, however. Another important benefit of a learner's being able to assess critically the foreign culture and acquire an understanding of it while at the same retaining a certain distance by staying rooted in his or her own culture is that such a learner can hopefully avoid adopting without reflection attitudes and claims about groups within the target culture (cf. Clark and Schleef (2010) for an example of Polish learners acquiring sociolinguistic evaluations of Birmingham English).

Furthermore, if a dialogical approach is adopted that takes into consideration the learner's own culture and how it interacts with the target culture, increased awareness of the different perspectives the world can be viewed from should translate into greater openness to the possibility of further cultural differences, opening the door for encounters with yet other foreign cultures (cf. Seelye 1997:207), which, due to the status of English as the world's *lingua franca*, should be of special interest to ESP.

7. Contrastive-Comparative Approach

Even when a teacher is convinced of the value of teaching culture, he or she might not know precisely how to go about it, and this is an issue not only in ESP but in English language teaching in general. There is a gap between the broad theoretical consensus that culture should be included in language curricula and the lack of impact of the culture concept

on language classes – "in spite of this strong endorsement by the theorists, the cultural component has remained difficult to accommodate in practice" (Stern 1992:206).

Members of any society will typically see the norms governing social (and linguistic) behaviour in their society as the default. Often, they will not expect differences to occur, and if they do notice dissimilarities, they will usually regard them as deviations. Building on such perceptions of cultural practices, learners will consequently attempt to assimilate or anchor differing behaviours within their existing categories. It is here that a contrastive-comparative approach can prove its value.

Byram, Morgan et al. (1994:43-44) see comparison, and especially contrast, as a means of helping learners to realise that the process of assimilation or anchoring will not do justice to the reality of other people's culture, their cultural values and meanings. What is needed is for learners to accept that other people have other schemata through which they understand their physical and social world and to relate it cognitively to their own socially determined representations of what might seem to be the same reality:

> [T]he psychological theory points quite clearly to the need for a comparative method: learners need to become aware of their own cultural schemata – and of the affective, attitudinal dimension of those schemata – in order to effect an acknowledgement of those of a different culture. (Byram, Morgan et al. 1994:43-44)

It follows from this that confrontation with their own culture as seen from the perspective of others is important when learners try to bring unconscious and naturalised beliefs into consciousness so that their relativity and specificity can be acknowledged; after all, culture can only really ever be construed as "resources and imagination produced, negotiated, and appropriated through contact with difference" (Singh and Doherty 2004:34).

Despite the fact that a comparative-contrastive approach can be very useful in establishing a relation between the source culture and target culture(s), attention needs to be paid to avoid reductionist ideas of cultural difference that might oversimplify or stereotype groups (Jund 2009; cf. the above discussion on the diversity of authenticities).

8. A Practical Application

A practical attempt at integrating culture in ESP through a comparative-contrastive approach was made in a course of English for students of Civil Engineering at the University of Ljubljana, Slovenia, in the academic year 2009–2010. Alongside the more conventional content expected in this type of course, a number of specialised (e.g. wood-framed construction in the USA vs. masonry construction in Slovenia) and semi-specialised (e.g. imperial system of units, homes in Britain and America) cultural topics were discussed. The cultural input was thus supposed to help learners not only in contexts where they will actually be in touch with members of the target culture but also indirectly, for instance when having to study from American textbooks and articles. The content comprised both "big C" and "little c" culture insofar as it pertained to the specialist field.

The cultural component was integrated into the syllabus in three ways. Most of the time cultural information was subsidiary to specialist language, e.g. when types of construction were discussed, the group also talked about the differences between the types of construction common in America and Slovenia (cf. Pérez 1999). In addition, "throw-away cultural information" was often provided when the focus of the lesson was on some other component: e.g. when American texts were used for the study of the properties of various materials and houses were given as a typical application of wood, the students were reminded of how this was linked to the typical type of construction in the USA.

The third method used for incorporating culture into the ESP syllabus was devoting a whole session to raising cross-cultural awareness. The lesson was divided into two parts, imperial system of measurement and homes in the UK and USA. The students were introduced to imperial units and referred to a website where they could study the matter in more detail. They tested their knowledge with the help of a quiz and tried their hand at conversion in a civil engineering context. In the second part, they were given resources to learn about homes in Britain from, and some of the content was checked with the help of another quiz. The students then led online discussions about differences between housing in Slovenia and English-speaking countries and how they were related to the systems of beliefs and values in the respective societies.

9. Student Response

A questionnaire was administered to students enrolled in the course to assess their attitudes towards the cultural information included in the syllabus. Feedback was obtained from 11 female and 21 male students in the first (18) and second (14) years.

The analysis of student questionnaires showed that students welcomed the inclusion of cultural information in the course as described above: 30 of the 32 students involved in the study believed that cultural knowledge was either occasionally important or very important for professional communication in their chosen field. A third of the students (9) would have appreciated even more instruction of this type, and not a single student felt too much emphasis was given to culture (cf. Kavalir 2010 for more details).

In comparison with Greek students of (general) English in Prodromou's (1992) study, where 60% of respondents believed British life and institutions should be part of the content of their English lessons and 26% felt the same way about American life and institutions, Slovenian students thus seem to exhibit more cultural curiosity; it should be noted, however, that they seem to have a more positive attitude to foreignness and acquire more "knowledge of the world" throughout their education compared to their peers in other countries (cf. Zhang, Lin and Hoge 2007). It is also true, on the other hand, that there will typically be a variety of cultural influences on student behaviour apart from national and regional influences, such as classroom and institution culture (Holliday 1994:54-55), and not all of the difference can be explained by the contribution of the source culture.

10. Conclusion

Despite the fact that cultural information is usually absent or at least understated in ESP courses, such content is necessary: language learning cannot be separated from culture and the cultural component is crucial when it comes to intercultural communication even when English is used as a *lingua franca*. While it has become axiomatic in language teaching to draw attention to the close ties between language and culture, ESP has for the most part not followed this path.

It is important to recognise the importance of culture for ESP courses irrespective of whether needs are defined as what students have to be able to do at the end of their language course or as what the society at large regards as desirable to be learnt from the programme (cf. Robinson 1991:7-8). As the example discussed in the paper testifies, such needs will also be readily acknowledged by the learners themselves: "if we treat culture and language as linked, we invite students in; if we mobilise and operationalise our students' lived experiences, we invite them in; and, if we open up our teaching to different modalities, we allow the language and culture nexus to flourish" (Rowsell et al. 2007:153).

To sum up, the views and studies presented in the paper point to the conclusion that culture should be included in the ESP syllabus: a contrastive-comparative approach to the delivery of cultural content can help the ESP learner to appropriate the foreign culture and make a positive step towards true intercultural communication.

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