

# **Developing Students' Cultural Capacity in EFL Class**

**Yanhong DUAN\* & Seiichi IKADATSU\*\***

\*Foreign Studies College, Northeastern University, P. R. China

\*\* Education Center, Tottori University, Japan

## **Abstract**

How to teach culture in an EFL class is a controversial question. In this paper, the authors attempt to offer an answer to this question by putting forward a proposition for developing students' cultural capacity in EFL learning. Firstly, the paper discusses the reasons and importance of developing students' cultural capacity. Then, it elaborates the theoretical difference between competence and capacity. Finally, the authors dwell on a three dimensional approach to developing students' cultural capacity and possible implications for TEFL.

## **Introduction**

The teaching of a foreign language inevitably involves the teaching of foreign cultures. English, as a foreign language in nonnative context, should be regarded not only as a resource for learning about foreign cultures but also as a means of cultural interaction. But how should we teach culture in foreign language education? A proposition for developing students' cultural capacity in EFL learning will be discussed. With the discussion of the importance of cultural studies in TEFL, this paper focuses on a three dimensional approach to developing learners' cultural capacity and possible implications for TEFL in China.

## **The importance of developing learners' cultural capacity in TEFL**

It is generally acknowledged that language and culture are closely associated with each other. One cannot hope to have a good command of a target language without adequate knowledge of the culture related to that language. In this sense, acquisition of information about foreign culture is as important as language learning itself.

Cultural studies provide learners with insights into the target culture, offering an opportunity to understand other countries, people and life styles without direct experience. People may become more tolerant of other cultures and less narrow-minded. Cultural studies

may broaden people's horizons and develop their personality. Just as proposed by Rivers, one of the objectives of teaching a foreign language is "to give students the experience of expressing themselves within another framework linguistically, kinesthetically and culturally" (Rivers, 1981:8). Another is "to bring students to a greater understanding of people across national barriers, by giving them a sympathetic insight into the ways of life and ways of thinking of people who speak the language they are learning" (ibid.).

We must point out at the same time that our emphasis on the importance of teaching culture in EFL class is based on the argument that the study of foreign cultures through language education will eventually help our students to develop their capacity for change. And this is significant in learning about foreign cultures in the long-term. In other words, culture learning may be the goal of the EFL program, but in regard to long-term and wide education goals, it is just a means, not the goal. In this sense, priority should be given to bringing about internal change within students. This is on the assumption that the EFL teaching "will ultimately lead to a liberation of the mind, to greater international understanding and co-operation, and toward an appreciation of (or at least respect for) other people's ways and values" (Lalande II, 1988:574). Nevertheless, this does not mean that the study of culture in EFL will automatically lead students to develop creative power and capacity for change. Corson (1989) points out that there is no equivalence between knowledge, understanding and a change in attitudes. In other words, the learner may gain cultural knowledge through cultural studies, but this does not guarantee an understanding of the target culture. And to understand target culture does not guarantee a change of attitude either.

In attempting to solve the above problem, we are going to suggest that foreign language educators should focus on developing learners' cultural capacity. Here, cultural capacity refers to the capability achieved through acquiring knowledge about foreign culture, embedded in language and beyond language, through using this knowledge in the performance of intercultural communication and creating new thinking for a new action. By focusing on the development of EFL students' cultural capacity, we are actually proposing a broad educational goal. The practice of this proposal indicates students encountering new cultural experiences, which should be related to what is already known and experienced.

### Theoretical considerations of cultural capacity

The notion of cultural capacity proposed here is mainly indebted to Widdowson's general notion of capacity in language use. His succinct description defines not only capacity but also its link with competence.

“Capacity... can be understood as the ability to solve problems, and equivalently to make meanings by interpreting a particular instance (an event, an expression) as related to some formula, thereby assimilating the instance into a pre-existing pattern of knowledge, or when necessary, by modifying the available formulae so that the instance can be accommodated with them. In this way, capacity works both to exploit existing competence and also to extend that competence to make provision for creativity and change. Capacity so defined is the driving force behind both the acquisition and the use of language” (Widdowson, 1983: 106).

There are at least three important points that are congruent with our arguments about learning from foreign culture. Firstly, we argue that through foreign language education the learners should learn how to solve problems in learning from the foreign culture, such as acculturation, assimilation, ethnocentrism, etc. Here Widdowson's notion first addresses “the ability to solve problems”. Secondly, we argue that we should encourage the students to learn to interact between home culture and foreign culture. The notion of capacity here also recommends “assimilating the instance into a pre-existing pattern of knowledge” and “modifying the available formulae”. In other words, it suggests interaction. Finally, we argue that education must transmit home culture and produce creative people to make changes, therefore, individual creativity and a power for change is emphasized. Similarly, Widdowson does not give priority to competence. Rather, he prefers capacity because “capacity works both to exploit existing competence and also to extend that competence to make provision for creativity and change” (ibid.).

The preference for capacity rather than competence derives from several reasons related to the above points. The first reason is that competence reflects “an analyst's construct”, while capacity is based on the language user himself. The second reason is that competence implies conformity while capacity implies a potential and dynamic feature (Widdowson, 1983). The third reason is that competence does not seem to explain clearly the relation between knowledge and ability whereas capacity perhaps provides a way for us to clarify this relationship. As Widdowson (1989) observes, the essential difference between competence and

capacity is really whether competence should be seen to include knowledge only or knowledge and ability. "For Chomsky, then, competence is grammatical knowledge as a deep-seated mental state below the level of language... For Hymes, on the other hand, competence is the ability to do something: to use language" (Widdowson, 1989:129).

The discussion above is intended to identify the theoretical difference between competence and capacity. In this discussion, culture capacity is defined as a creative power to be obtained through learning language and culture in foreign language education. Accordingly, the development or growth of this power is a process of internal change within an EFL learner. By using cultural capacity we pay more attention to the students' capacity to take part in cultural interaction above and beyond their ability to use a language.

### **How to develop students' cultural capacity**

To develop learners' cultural capacity, we must be aware of several steps in bringing about change in students. What EFL teachers do first is to help students learn to know. That is to say, teachers should help students to make a change from ignorance to awareness of foreign people and foreign countries. They must learn about foreign culture through EFL learning. Information about foreign people, their ways of life, their countries and the achievements of their civilization is needed in the EFL classroom. When teachers think about what information they should provide and how this information should be provided, attention must be not only on the information per se. Equally importantly, they should consider how the information could be used to develop the learners' ability to gain knowledge about foreign culture by themselves. When gaining knowledge about foreign culture, the learners' existing knowledge about the home culture is employed and interacts with new culture input. Through learning the learners turn externally available knowledge into their own internal knowledge.

However, the possession of knowledge about foreign culture does not guarantee an understanding of foreign culture, which also depends on the learners' previous experience. This leads us to think about the next step in the learners' internal change through EFL learning and perhaps the "key" step: from being knowledgeable to being flexible and open to new experiences (Robinson, 1985:110). The most effective way for an EFL learner to develop an understanding of foreign culture is probably to participate in the community in its cultural environment. But this is unrealistic for most EFL learners. However, this does not mean that a

learner cannot be a “participant”. “Classroom as culture”, as Breen (1985) calls it, is a real environment where the learner may begin to understand the foreign culture. The classroom is an artificially created cultural environment in which the students internal social reality meets a different external reality. As Kramersch says, “in class, culture is created and enacted through the dialogue between students and between teacher and students. Through their dialogue, participants not only replicate a given context of culture, but because it takes place in a foreign language, it also has the potential of shaping a new culture” (Kramersch, 1993:47).

Since we claim that EFL is a source for learning to know about foreign culture and also a means of interaction between home and foreign cultures, using EFL should be a means by which EFL learners experience alternative ways of doing things. This experience of alternative ways of doing things is the premise for breaking “conventional ways” and developing a capacity for change. If learners realize “the diversity of ways in which people may achieve what are ultimately the same goals of exchange and co-operation”, then they will adopt a more flexible attitude towards “unconventional ways” of doing things than those who only know their own tradition but never think about alternatives. This attitude helps students to know not only about other cultures but also their own culture, since beneath alternative ways of doing things, there is a commonality of the universal values shared by all cultures. Therefore, teachers should make comparisons between cultures, which may help students to understand foreign culture as well as their home culture. In other words, teachers should try to help students understand foreign culture and their home culture on the basis of previous experience and new knowledge. It is noteworthy that comparison helps students better understand the target culture of different cultural judgments. Comparison also helps students explain different cultural behavior, avoiding just explaining another’s behavior according to the learner’s own standards. Only by comparison can one distinguish the differences and improve the abilities of distinguishing acceptable culture and unacceptable culture, thus preventing learners from accepting the target culture uncritically.

If the learners can learn to interact between home culture and foreign culture, and if they are powerful enough to break their ethnocentric veneer and realize their cultural and linguistic blind spots due to a monolingual state, perhaps we can talk about the next step in the learners’ internal change, namely, the development of a creative power for change. According to the suggestion above, gaining knowledge about foreign culture in EFL class can strengthen a

learner's intellectual power since the learner changes from being ignorant to being knowledgeable. The learner can be further "empowered" by action to interact, because he or she begins to understand foreign culture and in return to understand the home culture better. These two steps are important for they indicate that the learners' relations with reality have started to change. He or she may view the world differently, since his or her perspective has been widened by breaking through mono-linguistic and mono-cultural limitations.

To accelerate this change, perhaps we should introduce Freire's (1970) concept of "generative learning" to EFL classes. In generative learning, teachers encourage students to understand the structural conditions in which the thought and language of people are dialectically framed. Students are encouraged to go beyond the known to the unknown, having acquired concepts and strategies to move on. In this process from the known to the unknown, they will see how they themselves act while actually experiencing the situation they are now analyzing, and thus reach a "perception of their previous perception". This step in perception is significant, because by achieving this awareness, they come to perceive reality differently: by broadening the horizons of their perception, they discover more easily in their "background awareness" the dialectical relations between the two dimensions of reality."(question??) (Freire, 1970:108).

If learners are able to gain insight into their previous perception and to inquire into their previous knowledge and experience, a change is in the making, because change is made on the basis of critique of existing conventions. If learners, through learning EFL, have developed a creative power for change, then perhaps we can say they have what we have called cultural capacity.

### **Implications for TEFL**

1) We have argued that EFL can be used to develop learners' cultural capacity and that teaching EFL should concern the development of learners' internal change and their creativity. Hence the importance of EFL in education must be re-assessed. Its position in the curriculum of schools and universities must be reconsidered. This reconsideration should be made with an overall view of education at primary, secondary and tertiary levels if we are to see the development of cultural capacity

as a continuing and dynamic process. Taking account of the age, motivation, language proficiency and potential needs of learners at different levels, a consistent long-term educational plan must be worked out.

2) The leading role of the teacher is most obvious in the classroom because the teacher is often regarded as the center of teaching practice in some countries, such as in China. But if we suggest that emphasis should be placed on the development of the learner's cultural capacity or communicative competence, the role of the teacher must be considered in relationship to the learners. This indicates that the students should not be a passive receiver who is to be fed by teachers with external knowledge. The learners should be given more autonomy in learning and encouraged to search for new knowledge. In other words, language teaching and learning should be focusing on the learners. However, the adoption of learner-centered approach in TEFL does not deny the important role of the teacher. Rather it gives the teacher a more challenging role to play (Nunan, 1988).

By linking knowledge and ability, cultural capacity involves a coherent relationship between teachers and students rather than a dichotomy between two separate groups in the classroom. On the one hand, the development of cultural capacity requires the provision of information and organization of activities in the classroom. The teacher's role is important because the learners will assume that the teacher knows more about foreign culture and has the authority to interpret foreign culture. On the other hand, cultural capacity emphasizes the learner's own ability to use and explore knowledge. The learner's autonomy is important because the change is occurring within the individual.

3) If we take into account the learner's active role in language learning, we must concentrate on the content as well as on the process of language learning. In terms of the content, we should integrate language learning, language awareness, cultural awareness and cultural experience with the aim of developing learners' knowledge. With respect to process, ability is the capability of processing cultural information plus both the creativity to explore new culture and the power to view different worlds (Kramsch, 1993:237). Our proposition for cultural capacity suggests a link between knowledge and ability. It demands an understanding of how knowledge is the basis of ability, which in turn is the source of developing new knowledge. A three dimensional approach to learning EFL, by focusing on learning to know, to do and to interact, requires knowledge in a relationship with ability, and therefore content in relation to

process. Our description of the above three stages in developing cultural capacity shows that content and process cannot exist independently of each other. Hence EFL educators do not need to see content and process as an uncompromising dichotomy.

4) To set about achieving reforms along these lines, compiling new teaching materials and improving teaching methods is imperative. The proposition of cultural capacity requires new teaching materials. And the new teaching materials must contain a wide range of information about foreign cultures in relation to reality so that comparisons can be made and interactions stimulated. The content of teaching materials must be conjoined with teaching methods. EFL teachers must change the "conventional" way in which learners are seen as passive knowledge receivers. They must think more about how to bring about internal change in their learners.

### Conclusion

In conclusion, the idea of developing learners' cultural capacity is a constructive proposal for how to teach culture in foreign language education. To put this idea into practice, the existing EFL curriculum must change. Of course, to make change is an arduous task. In this sense, the proposal of cultural capacity is just a small contribution we have made in order to bring changes to EFL education.

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