

Promoting the Concept of Cultural Awareness as a Curricular Objective in an ESL/EFL

Setting:

A Case Study of Policy and Practice

Ibrahim A. El-Hussari

Lebanese American University

Dr. Ibrahim A. El-Hussari is Professor of English and Cultural Studies at the Department of Humanities of the School of Arts and Sciences, The Lebanese American University, Beirut, Lebanon. His research interest is mainly in the areas of language and culture, discourse analysis, comparative literature, and translation.

Introduction

In a rapidly changing world where monolithic cultures are almost becoming a myth, English as an international language has become instrumental as a medium of communication and interaction between various cultural groups across real and virtual borders. Thus the development of intercultural and cross-cultural skills using English has become more than desirable. It is therefore necessary that ESL teachers, viewed as cultural mediators (Cortazzi & Jin, 1996) pay attention to inter/cross-cultural knowledge and awareness of cultural stereotyping, as they develop in their students unbiased attitudes towards their own culture and the cultures they learn about. As this assumption depends on the content of the language curriculum and the

policy being implemented, this study explores the notions of culture and *cultural awareness* presented in the language classroom and the vision of society they intend to serve.

Also, teaching methods, approaches, and techniques are cultural practices that occur within specific discourses and imply particular understanding of language, of teacher and student roles. This study attempts to explore the language classroom not as a site where a neutral body of curricular knowledge is passed on to students but as a site where teacher and student belief systems may be constantly in conflict. The conflicting views of school participants are likely to problematize the teaching-learning process of the concept of *cultural awareness* as the hidden component of the ESL/EFL curriculum in the micro-context of school and classroom practice. School participants are viewed by this study as active agents whose roles are important to the implementation of an education/language policy. Thus classroom interaction between teachers and secondary-age students in a second language classroom in which *cultural awareness* can be promoted is considered crucial to this study. Let alone the good intentions of policy statements and guidelines, language teaching recognizes no neutral language curriculum (Pennycook, 1994), and therefore it falls to the teachers (Fullan, 1993; Giroux, 1994) to play out the theoretical concept of *cultural awareness* in the realities of the EFL/ESL classroom.

The Educational Issue under Study

This paper is based on a case study that explores through qualitative data analysis (Erickson, 1990; Miles & Huberman, 1994) the implementation of the education/language policy of the Lebanese New National Curriculum (henceforth NNC) in terms of the concept of *cultural awareness*, and the role of school culture in implementing this policy. It looks at what *cultural*

awareness means in the stated policies of the NNC and the new language curriculum, and how language teachers interpret and implement these policies when using the national textbook, THEMES (1998), as a tool commissioned to do that. The case study also examines whether the new educational policy urging teachers and students to promote a new “cultural” language curriculum allows these teachers and students to “shift” their cultures of teaching and learning in secondary schools. That is, the study looks at how the people who deliver the new language curriculum behave while responding to the influence of societal factors around them.

The New National Curriculum

This study is concerned with the Lebanese current view of education, which seeks to effect significant changes to the school education system. This educational view has engendered a new national curriculum in which diversity is recognized as the basis of school life. Addressing the Lebanese multicultural, multilingual community, the NNC attempts to develop a new generation of learners without ignoring their rights in maintaining their spiritual and cultural heritage (NNC, 1997) as they integrate into their larger pluralistic society and beyond. The NNC assumes to undertake such an educational aim through government policy documents, special teacher training education workshops, and the new series of the national textbook authored under the guidance and sponsorship of the National Center for Educational Research and Development (NCERD). It is doubtful, however, that the implementation of such an educational aim highlighting the concept of *cultural awareness* can be warranted. Educational institutions and the teaching staff participating within them are facing problems related to their ability to implement the new educational policy into classroom practice. In Lebanon, the socio-political context in whose atmosphere such educational policies are played out in practice, together with local

factors within the educational institutions, may conspire against the teachers who deliver the new curriculum, thus resulting in a variety of outcomes.

According to the NNC policy documents and curricular objectives, national textbooks covering all disciplines of school education were designed and developed by local committees of Lebanese authors who were selected on the basis of their diverse confessional as well as political/partisan affiliation. The NNC aimed at revising, updating, and replacing the existing school curricula unchecked during the Lebanese Civil War (1975-1990). It introduced policy documents planning the curricular objectives of the new school programs, of which the new English curriculum is one.

Broadly, the NNC (1997) policy documents introduced curriculum innovation as follows:

The innovations in the proposed curriculum considered the following criteria: unrestricted openness to life; practical coping with up-to-date world curricula; organic linkage between academic and vocational education; smooth transfer from high school to university life; and necessary enrichment of curriculum with fine arts and humanities (p. 12).

Specifically, a methodological overview of the new English curriculum aims to develop three levels of English language proficiency: “English for social interaction, English for academic purposes, and English for socio-cultural development” (NNC, 1997, p.72). It is the last of these with which this paper is concerned.

Literature Review

Findings from linguistic anthropology indicate that the ESL/EFL profession is slowly becoming

aware of the importance of “recognizing and respecting students’ native cultures” (Nelson, in Byrd, 1995, p.28) more especially in the increasingly “ethnic fragmented societies” (Abu-Lughod, 1991, p. 137). Linguistic anthropologists tend to problematize both culture and the relationship between culture and language (Duranti, 1997). They discuss the multi-voiced, contested nature of culture in a multi-lingual, multi-cultural society where the issue of culture is critiqued as the dominant ideology challenged by popular culture as well as the sub-cultures of ethnic minorities (Foucault, 1971). This awareness of culture in which language lends meaning to socio-cultural worldviews within a cultural group is considered by this paper as necessary but not sufficient to understanding the concept of culture in a changing world.

Also, the findings from socio-linguistics indicate that significant differences are socially constructed. The social codes provide us with a repertoire of behavior, which defines our social position and identity as participants in culture. In the process of socialization, language has an important role to play. Language comprises not only a significant element in behavior but also helps us to formulate concepts and ways of meaning that are crucial to the construction of our identity, including gender, ethnicity, age, and so forth. This broad view of culture from sociolinguistics shows how language and culture are interconnected in our social life, but it does not provide a perspective from which culture can be defined in relation to social mobility and cultural change, which are basic characteristics of current society. The role of socio-linguistics in shifting language analysis from a focus on language structure to one of language in context is widely recognized (Hornberger, 1997; Hymes, 1971). Within this view of culture in context (see also Kramsch, 1993), the responsibility rests with the language teacher promoting cultural awareness as mediated through language, not as studied by social scientists and anthropologists.

Applied Linguistics

Atkinson's view of culture. Reviewing the relationship between culture and TESOL in the last eighteen years, Atkinson (1999) refers to two views of culture: '*a received, commonsense view of culture*' and '*non-standard notions of culture*'. For him, these two views of culture are inadequate for they are extreme possible interpretations of the notions of culture. By the *received view* of culture, Atkinson refers to an outdated notion of culture that is "nationally distinct, homogeneous, relatively unchanging, and as all-encompassing systems of rules or norms that substantially determine personal behavior" (Atkinson, 1999, p.626). By *non-standard notions* of culture, Atkinson refers to concepts emanating from critiques of received views of culture. Terms such as *identity, hybridity, difference, discourse, and power* are to be questioned when anthropologists use them as part of a homogeneous culture. In this sense, the term culture is so encumbered and compromised as to be misleading.

Holliday's view of culture. Holliday (1999) distinguishes between two paradigms of culture in applied linguistics: large and small cultures. He develops a definition of culture by contrasting the two paradigms in such a way that 'large' signifies "ethnic, national, or international" cultural differences, and 'small' signifies "any cohesive social grouping" (Holliday, 1999, p.237). He claims that a small culture approach attempts to "liberate culture from notions of ethnicity and nation and from the perceptual dangers they carry with them" (Holliday, 1999, p.237). Whilst a large culture approach, he argues, is what makes cultures essentially different to each other, a small culture approach is more concerned with social processes as they emerge. As it moves in

process, small culture involves an underlying competence in which actors are active cultural beings who form rules and meanings in collaboration with others. The language classroom is an example of this interaction with an existing environment, not necessarily of an ongoing improvement, but of a dialogue (Coleman, 1996). In line with this definition of the small culture approach, culture cannot be seen as “a monolithic entity determining the behavior of its members, but as a mélange of understandings and expectations regarding a variety of activities that serve as guides to their conduct and interpretation” (Goodenough, 1994, p.267).

An Emerging View of Culture

In a rapidly changing world whose salient features are diversity, hybridization, and globalization, the term ‘culture’ today is not as easily defined as it used to be. However, a definition useful to this paper has emerged from the various views of culture reviewed from the literature. In the field of language teaching and learning, this emergent view of culture is a process in which emphasis is placed on context and situated practice. Attention to context calls for a type of teachers’ pedagogy that fosters both direct and indirect ways of transmitting knowledge; that values not only facts but relations between facts; that encourages diversity of experience and reflection on that diversity. Situated practice draws on the experience of meaning-making in the life-worlds of the learners and their discourses, which are increasingly defined by cultural diversity and practices that come with that diversity. Situated practice is about the actual practice of negotiation of cultural differences, although differences are not usually neutral. To negotiate differences in values is a necessary step to cross-cultural and linguistic boundaries through dialogue. This brings to the fore some of the life experiences of the learners who approach a

variety of texts in foreign language education. Whether these texts are presented as local, international, misrepresentative, or remarkable for their omission of the learners' position, learners can at least see themselves in their relation to those texts but independent of the constructs. Such a notion of culture, grounded in socio-cultural settings (e.g., schools and classrooms) is necessarily related to the learners' own life-world knowledge and interests through their immersion in hands-on experience, a process that provides learners with ways of reading the world (Cope & Kalantzis, 2000).

Within this view of culture in foreign language education, learners are encouraged to play multiple and different roles based on their backgrounds and experiences. If the language classroom is a "social microcosm in itself" (Allwright, in Coleman, 1992, p.209) and "the shaping of context through dialogue" (Kramsch, 1993, p.235) is at the heart of the language classroom pedagogy, then learners become aware of the various frames of reference used to describe experience. It is this interactive discourse in the language classroom that provides the means of entering another person's frame of reference and developing cultural and social awareness. This emergent view of culture in context and situated practice is perhaps at the heart of the process of foreign language education. Language teachers, who teach the cultural aspects of a language text, do not only teach formal structures of language based on grammar rules, but the "actualization of meaning potential associated with particular situation types" (Halliday, 1978, p.109). This possible definition of culture is useful to understand *cultural awareness* which is central to this study.

Cultural awareness. Introduced by Tomalin and Stempleski (1993) and expanded upon by Jones

(1995), *cultural awareness* is a relatively new term in foreign language education. Tomalin and Stempleski (1993) suggest that the learners be made aware of members of another cultural group: their behavior, their expectations, their perspectives and values. According to them, language teachers should be trained to urge their students to attempt to understand the reasons for the actions and beliefs of the other cultural group/s whose language they are learning to use. Tomalin and Stempleski (1993) design language activities (10 to 60 minutes long) that aim for cultural orientation in foreign language education. Among these activities, to mention only a few, there are exercises about working with cultural products, examining patterns of everyday life and cultural behavior, exploring patterns of communication, and exploring cultural experiences that influence cultural identity (cf. Norton, 1997). As these exercises are oriented towards a selective view of the target culture (which is complex, loaded, and problematic), there is some danger that such an orientation may lead ESL students to stereotype from the language activities if they develop a partial view of cultural awareness based on pre-designed models.

Jones (1995) uses the term *cultural awareness* with caution, because to him ‘culture’ is “frequently considered by learners to be something to be observed, existing solely as a fixed, stable, self-defining phenomenon” (Jones, 1995, p.18). Hence he suggests strategies which help students explore the concept of ‘otherness’: “what evidence of a way of life, a set of beliefs, or a way of behaving means to them” (Jones, 1995, p.19). In this context, the role of learners is to define what they interpret this “otherness” to be. Jones’s views offer a way for learners to seek more knowledge, avoid judgmental evaluation, and open themselves to the possibility of changes of mind without being unsettled by the experience. They also offer ways into the learners’ explorations of conventions and modes of behavior which can enhance communication, and

without which even relatively casual or brief contact with others may be problematic. Thus, the view of developing *cultural awareness* through culture of learning (cf. Cotrazzi & Jin, in Coleman, 1996) goes beyond the cultural content of ESL textbooks to include what teachers and students bring to classroom interaction as they approach the cultural dimension of text through its socio-cultural context. That is, learning about culture in a language classroom entails a dialogue in which students negotiate meaning of the cultural content of text and context with the teacher who may mediate ways in which students see themselves.

My Own View of Cultural Awareness

Cultural Awareness is a relatively new pedagogical term in ESL/EFL context. There are numerous references to ‘cultural awareness’ and ‘cross-cultural awareness’ in the literature of the early 1980’s (Alptekin & Alptekin, 1984; Canale & Swain, 1980; Green, 1982; Thomas, 1984) which probably implied some difference between the two terms. Although none of the above views, alone, has offered an adequate definition of *cultural awareness*, my own understanding of the term has emerged from bringing all these views together. As I state my own definition of cultural awareness hereunder, I do not claim that it is definitive or final. In fact, such a definition will be used as a frame of reference as I look at how policy is played out in practice.

In my view, cultural awareness is a process in which language learning offers an opportunity for students to develop a shared world of interaction and experience through discovering the meaning of text in relation to its context of situation. In this process of discovering meanings and practices, students negotiate and create a new reality by using their own frames of reference (Cortazzi & Jin, 1999; Holliday, 1999), deriving basically from their

life world experience and socio-cultural background. Only then do students find themselves in a position to understand the dialectical relationship between text and context as well as self and other (cf. Kramsch, 1993). In this process, also, students move from contact with otherness, to comparison and appreciation of similarities and differences (Tomalin & Stempleski, 1993; 1995), to identifying with otherness (Jones, 1995), and finally to taking an objective view of their own cultures (Byram & Fleming, 1998). Furthermore, through the process of learning about other cultures, students are encouraged to identify and define barriers to effective cross-cultural relationships, thus acquiring new ways of addressing prejudice and dispelling any stereotypes or misconceptions they may have of other cultures.

Set against stereotyping, which often results from sweeping judgments that need evidence to substantiate, *cultural awareness* assumes a concept of progression. In this progression, students gradually develop an awareness of “self” and “other” as their attention is turned back onto themselves and the way of life which they often take for granted and rarely question. It is the notion of comparison of one’s own culture and other cultures, thus beginning to help students to perceive and cope with difference. It provides students with the basis for successful interaction with members of another cultural group, not just the means of exchanging information. In this process, students are encouraged to show positive attitudes towards and understanding of the cultures of the target language (NNC, 1997) as they work with authentic materials deriving from the communities of that language. Furthermore, cultural awareness needs to use the notions of investigation and exploration whose results are likely to appear in students’ reports, research work, and journals. This process of students’ reflective learning can be motivated by a classroom pedagogy that couples evidence seeking from text (Jones, 1995) with students’ interests (Cope &

Kalantzis, 2000) in exploring and investigating aspects of the other culture.

Bringing together the Lebanese policy documents on *cultural awareness*, the emerging views of culture and *cultural awareness* from the literature, together with the diverse perspectives on cultural learning through texts, I argue that a fuller understanding of the concept of *cultural awareness* in language teaching and learning, though a painstaking effort, is not hard to make do.

Findings from Data Analysis

The data generated from the case study tools, namely interviews, questionnaires, vignettes, school documents, and classroom observation, have invariably shown themes and patterns that do not practically reflect the curricular objectives as desired by the policy guidelines. To this end, *cultural awareness*, both as a term in the literature and the Lebanese NNC policy documents, is found as under-theorized and under-resourced in its implementation. This has been reached through describing, interpreting and analyzing the themes emerging from the data collected from the case study in light of available literature, the multiple voices in the field setting, and my own voice as part of this interpretive process. I have reported these multiple views using the language of the main participants themselves and my own. Quoting my informants to describe what was going on in the field setting is based on the belief that language indexes our social world.

Concluding Remarks

This paper has redefined both culture and *cultural awareness* as hidden components of a language curriculum in an EFL/ESL setting. The literature reviewed in this study has enabled me

to formulate the emerging views of culture and *cultural awareness*, which, together with the NNC policy guidelines and THEMES book, have been used as a frame of reference against which to examine patterns and themes emerging from the data collected in the case study whose basic guide is the research question seeking to demystify the policy-practice divide. In short, my participants have shown different perceptions of the terms ‘culture’ and ‘cultural awareness’, much more in classroom practice. Apart from individual teachers’ efforts delivering the new curriculum, it was not so difficult to find that the implementation of the policy guidelines on cultural awareness was not uniform in the four schools making the case study. The implementation of the new educational policy, whose declared goal is social transformation and the change of life for the people, is a complex process. This process needs both time and socio-political stability, and above all teachers’ ability to develop a critical pedagogy that questions the policy through application instead of applying it as a prescription. The study has also shown that there is a need to bring together the concepts of *cultural awareness* and stereotyping which inform one another when compared and contrasted in the language classroom, beyond models of resistance and patterns of domination.

References

- Abu-Lughod, L. (1991). Writing against culture. In R. Fox (Ed.), *Recapturing Anthropology: Working in the present* (pp. 137-162). Santa Fe, NM: School of American Research Press.
- Allwright, D. (1992). Interaction in the language classroom: Social problems and pedagogic possibilities. In H. Coleman (Ed.), *Society and the language classroom* (pp. 209-228). Cambridge: CUP.

- Alptekin, C., & Alptekin, M. (1984). The question of culture: EFL teaching in non- English speaking countries. *ELT Journal*, 38, 14-20.
- Atkinson, D. (1999). *TESOL and Culture*. *TESOL Quarterly*, 33, 625-649.
- Byram, M., & Fleming, M. (Eds.). (1998). *Language learning in intercultural perspective: Approaches through drama and ethnography* (pp.1-9). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Canale, M., & Swain, M. (1980). Theoretical bases of communicative approaches to second language teaching and testing. *Applied Linguistics*, 1(1), 1-47.
- Coleman, H. (Ed.) (1996). *Society and the language classroom*. Cambridge: CUP
- Cope, B., & Kalantzis, M. (Eds.) (2000). *Multiliteracies: Literacy learning and the design of social futures*. London: Routledge.
- Cortazzi, M., & Jin, L. (1996). Cultures of Learning: Language classrooms in China. In H. Coleman (Ed.), *Society and the language classroom* (pp.169-206). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Cortazzi, M., & Jin, L. (1999). Cultural mirrors: Materials and methods in the EFL Classroom. In E. Hinkel (Ed.), *Culture in second language teaching and learning* (pp. 196-219). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Duranti, A. (1997). *Linguistic anthropology*. Cambridge: CUP.
- Erickson, F. (1990). Qualitative methods. In R. L. Linn & F. Erickson (Eds.), *Research in teaching and learning Vol. 2* (pp.77–187). New York: Macmillan Publishing Company.
- Foucault, M. (1980). *Power/Knowledge: Selected interviews & other writings, 1972-1977*. N.Y.: Pantheon Books.
- Fullan, M. (1993). *Change forces: Probing the depths of educational reform*. London: The

- Falmer Press.
- Giroux, H. (1994). Towards a critical pedagogy for teaching English as a worldly language. In A. Pennycook (Ed.), *The cultural politics of English as an international language* (pp. 295-327). London: Longman.
- Halliday, M.A.K. (1978). *Language as social semiotic: The social interpretation of language and meaning*. London: Edward Arnold.
- Holliday, A. (1999). Small cultures. *Applied Linguistics*, 20(2), 237-264.
- Hornberger, N. (2000). Bilingual education policy and practice in the Andes: Ideological paradox and intercultural possibility. *Anthropology & Education Quarterly*, 31(2), 173-197.
- Hymes, D. (1971). Competence and performance in linguistic theory. In R. Huxley & E. Ingram (Eds.), *Language acquisition: Models and methods* (pp. 3-28). London: Academic Press.
- Jones, B. (1995). *Exploring otherness: An approach to cultural awareness*. London: Centre for Information on Language Teaching and Research.
- Kramsch, C. (1993). *Context and culture in language teaching*. Oxford: OUP.
- Miles, M., & Huberman, M. (1994). *Qualitative data analysis: A sourcebook of new methods* (2nd ed.). London: Sage Publications.
- Milroy, L. (1980). *Language and social networks*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Ministry of National Education (1994). *Plan for educational reform*. Beirut: NCERD.
- Ministry of National Education (1997). *The new national curriculum*. Beirut: NCERD.
- Nelson, G. (1995). Considering Culture: guidelines for ESL/EFL textbook writers. In P. Byrd (Ed.), *Material writer's guide* (pp. 23-39). N.Y.: Heinle & Heinle.
- Norton, B. (1997). *Language, identity, and the ownership of English*. *TESOL Quarterly*, 31, 409-

429.

Pennycook, A. (1994). *The cultural politics of English as an international language*. London:

Longman.

Thomas, J. (1984). Cross-cultural pragmatic failure. *Applied Linguistics* 4(2), 91- 112.

Tomalin, B., & Stempleski, S. (1993). *Cultural awareness*. Oxford: OUP.

Received: February 7, 2008

Published: June, 2008