

Teaching English as an international language: Cultural issues [1]

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English teachers today make many basic decisions when they plan and teach their classes. They make decisions about logistics, such as the size of classes and the number of hours spent in class. Teachers make pedagogical decisions, such as what to teach in a class and which texts to select. And teachers make cultural decisions. The later decision, as McKay (2003) notes, is complex. Raising it as an issue brings with it three basic questions. What is an international language? What is the role of culture in language learning? And, what is the role of culture in language teaching?

An international language

The first question to ask is “What is an international language?” Several features of international languages must be considered.

The first feature is the breadth of the language: how many people speak it. This is a basic feature, but not the only one because being widely spoken doesn't mean that it is the most widely spoken. There are at least two ways of being a speaker. The first is being a native speaker. In this sense, English is not the most widely spoken language in the world; that is Mandarin Chinese.

English is an international language, at present, not simply because of the number of native speakers. More important is the rapidly growing number of non-native (L2) speakers. In fact, in the near future it is likely that the number of L2 speakers will soon reach and surpass the number of native speakers of English.

This suggests a second central feature of an international language: it coexists with other local languages without replacing them. An international language is used alongside other, local languages, thus creating a multilingual context. It is not “English or nothing” but “English and Malay” and “English and Swahili.” This results in many bilingual speakers.

For these bilingual speakers, English is in some ways culture free. They do not need to

acquire the culture of native speakers of English. So, unlike immigrants to English-speaking countries, they do not live among native-English speakers. They speak English but they live Indian or Japanese. Given this, what exactly are the cultural features of an international language? Smith (1976) lays out three.

First, L2 speakers do not need to internalize the cultural norms of native speakers of the language. They use English without becoming American or English or Australian. They use English and keep their own culture and values.

Second, the international language becomes denationalized to an extent. This means that English is free of American national and international politics and economic policies. So, to a degree, people use English without endorsing American policies.

Third, the purpose of an international language is to facilitate communication of ideas, thoughts, feelings, knowledge and culture — the language is a medium. We use English to explain and better understand Chinese culture or the way of life of people in Sri Lanka.

These features of an international language are suggestions, not facts. They need to be discussed. But they are a starting point. From them two more basic questions emerge. “How does culture shape the learning of English as an international language?” And “How does culture shape the teaching of English as an international language?” These questions form the basis of the next essays.

References

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