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# Current Concerns in Socio-cultural Training in the Classroom

**Simon Greenall,**  
***Macmillan Education***

## Introduction

Having already discussed in *The Language Teacher* the theoretical issues of my plenary presentation at the JALT conference in Shizuoka, I would like to offer a summary of the practical activities and the slides I used.

## Current concerns...

Over the past thirteen years, teachers in talks and workshops have mentioned a number of concerns about socio-cultural training in classrooms. My presentation was structured around the following eight concerns, as expressed by teachers, which were then illustrated with a variety of activities:

1. 'It's easy if you have a multi-cultural group. But what can we do in mono-cultural classes like ours?'
2. 'How can I teach socio-cultural awareness at low levels?'
3. 'Grammar, skills, pronunciation – there's so much else to teach. I just don't have enough time to teach socio-cultural awareness.'
4. 'What exactly does a socio-cultural syllabus cover?'
5. 'Much of the material is just anecdotal evidence. So what?'
6. 'My students are never going to live or work in the US, Australia or the UK. Why bother?'
7. 'Most socio-cultural awareness simply reinforces stereotypes.'
8. 'Is it really my job as a language teacher to teach cross-cultural awareness?'

## 1. 'It's easy if you have a multi-cultural group. But what can we do in monocultural classes like ours?'

This is an activity, which focuses not on the broad concept of macroculture (the Americans, the Japanese, the British etc) but on the microcultural differences between people of the same macroculture. We ask our students:

What do you miss when you're away from home?

What do you look forward to when you return?

Here are some of the replies from British teachers overseas.

*'The crossword.'*

*'The Sunday papers.'*

*'A nice cup of tea.'*

*'Baked beans/ sausages/Marmite.'*

*'The sense of humour.'*

*'My cat.'*

*'The radio cricket commentary.'*

*'Manageably sized insects.'*

*'My own bathroom.'*

*'My bed.'*

## 2. 'How can I teach socio-cultural awareness at low levels?'

This activity focuses on how one can provide opportunities for socio-cultural awareness even at the lowest levels of linguistic competence. We ask our students:

Think of eight favourite words to take to your deserted island and one phrase or saying.

## 3. 'Grammar, skills, pronunciation—there's so much else to teach. I just don't have enough time to teach socio-cultural awareness.'

In this part of the talk, I drew attention to the linguistic aspects of socio-cultural competence, and to the fact that certain phrases or sentences can be linguistically very simple, but socio-culturally more complex. The examples I used were:

- What's your name?
- What political party do you vote for?
- How old are you?
- How much do you earn?

If a language learner makes basic mistakes in sentences such as 'How old *is* you?' 'How much *is* you *earning*?' then you are more likely to notice the socio-cultural inappropriateness of the question than the grammatical mistake.

Whenever we teach language functionally, we are usually aware of issues such as register, appropriateness and formality. The following language functions have strong socio-cultural implications:

### **Functions**

Greetings and making introductions

Thanking

Apologising

Complaining

Giving opinions

Making compliments  
 Expressing feelings  
 Expressing ability  
 Back channelling

#### 4. 'What exactly does a socio-cultural syllabus cover?'

As a course designer, the three major categories of socio-cultural syllabus which I use are:

- Linguistic and non-linguistic social conventions and rituals
- Customs and traditions
- Attitudes and beliefs

Looking at these areas in greater detail, *social conventions and rituals* would include greetings, reciprocal speech, silent smiling, eye contact, gestures, appearance and personal space.

*Customs and traditions* would cover wedding ceremonies, table manners, buying food, giving gifts, festivals, and folk stories. For example, in an activity about home visits, we could ask our students to talk about these questions:

- You're invited to someone's home for dinner. What time do you expect to be invited?
- What time do you arrive?
- Do you take a gift? If so, what?
- When do you expect to eat?
- What do you say before you start eating? In which hand do you hold your fork?
- Do you compliment your host?

- Can you smoke during the meal?
- How do you know when to leave?

*Attitudes and beliefs* would include superstitions, face, relationships between men and women, ancestors, networking and time.

It should be noted that these three categories overlap with one another. The distinction is simply useful to ensure a balanced coverage of subjects for socio-cultural training in textbooks and classes.

Socio-cultural training will include a variety of materials and activity types:

- Cultural self-awareness
- Cognitive training
- C2 comparison
- Experiential training
- Critical incidents
- Cultural resonance
- L1 interference

Some of the following activities will demonstrate different activity types. The following activity focuses as much on personal tastes and choices (microculture) as on a broader concept of culture (macroculture):

Say which of these food items people in your country usually buy each week.

*rice oranges potatoes fish sausage beer water flour noodles eggs tea coffee oil butter yogurt shrimp bread sugar cheese*

Which items do you (or your family) usually, sometimes or never buy each week?

Examining and inventing cultural icons allows the learners to focus on important values in the society in which they live, as this activity will show:

### **Cultural icons**

- Look at some coins or bank notes from your country. Who or what is shown on them? What values do they represent?
- What product manufactured in your country is famous in other countries? Describe its features.
- Decide what kind of person is likely to buy it, or would like to buy it.
- Design a postage stamp, which shows people, places, objects or symbols that represent the spirit and values of your hometown or country.

Critical incidents present a situation in which some confusion or embarrassment has taken place. The learners are invited to discuss and analyse the situation and, in doing so, develop an awareness that their own reactions and behaviour may not always be shared or replicated by others. The following critical incident focuses on the concept of *face*.

“I invited a friend to a dinner party at my apartment last Thursday. She replied, ‘Yes, I’d love to come, but it might be difficult.’ I didn’t hear from her so I expected her to come. But she didn’t. Why didn’t she call me and let me know?”

Words may, to a lesser or greater extent, have *cultural resonance*; they summon images and feelings which may be more significant in meaning than their literal meaning. Examples of this would be as follows:

What ideas do you associate with these colours?

*green white yellow blue red*

What are the qualities of these animals?

*sheep goat donkey dog frog*

What words do you associate with these ideas?

*home book beach New Year school English*

Numbers: 3 4 7 8 9 13

Flowers: *carnations chrysanthemums*

Gifts: *clock penknife handkerchief*

The learner’s L1 may sometimes interfere, especially in colloquial language or conversation structure.

- Today is 26 January. Someone says, ‘It’s 26 January, isn’t it?’ What do you say?  
*A. No, it is. B. Yes, it isn’t. C. Yes, it is. D. No, it isn’t.*
- Someone says, ‘My mother sends you her best wishes.’ What do you say?  
*A. Send them back B. Send her mine.*
- You say to someone, ‘The traffic was really awful.’ The person replies ‘Really?’ What do you reply?  
*A. Yes, really. B. Yes, it was. C. No, really!*

### 5. ‘Much of the material is just anecdotal evidence. So what?’

Anecdotes describing shared experiences are essential to a learner’s growing awareness of socio-cultural issues, and if used carefully, can greatly contribute to the motivational value of a lesson with a socio-cultural objective.

### 6. ‘My students are never going to live or work in the USA/Australia/the UK. Why bother?’

At the moment we seem to be passing through a period of “re-culturalisation” of English. Thirty years ago, English was studied in a context in which the USA/UK/Australia, etc were *target* cultures, cultures in which the learner was expected to study, live or work, or simply to acquire information about.

Twenty years, among native speaker teachers, the cultural origins of the language were ignored in an attempt to resist a potential criticism of linguistic imperialism.

Today we seem to be experiencing a period where the link between language and culture is recognised again and *sample* cultures are explored.

### 7. ‘Most socio-cultural awareness simply reinforces stereotypes.’

Stereotyping is traditionally regarded as suspect and to be avoided. But in the L2 classroom, stereotyping, if carefully handled, may contribute towards socio-cultural awareness, if only by simply examining the nature and the value of the stereotype itself. We can introduce the concept of a *useful*

*stereotype* if we can draw attention not only to the nature and extent of the socio-cultural phenomenon it describes but also to what it excludes.

### 8. ‘Is it really my job as a language teacher to teach cross-cultural awareness?’

The unequivocal answer is yes. Language and culture are inseparable, and both contribute equally to what should be our primary objective in the language classroom, effective communication. The consequences of ignoring the socio-cultural aspect in communicative situations may involve surprise and confusion, a perception of offence where none was intended, and will lead to communication breakdown. On a macrocultural scale, it is at this point that conflict and war break out.

It is our responsibility as educators to provide our learners with the tools to dismantle incomprehension and prejudice, and to build communication and understanding between people – something that politicians, diplomats and soldiers often fail to do.

## Conclusions

1. The key to an awareness of other cultures is an awareness of your own.
2. Socio-cultural training can be integrated with the grammatical, functional syllabuses and skills syllabuses.
3. Socio-cultural training is not an option. Its absence can compromise effective communication.

4. Cross cultural awareness does not imply assimilation or mimicry but the understanding and appreciation of different values.

5. We cannot give our learners specific information about every culture, but we can make them aware of the possibility of differences.

6. Effective communication = linguistic competence *and* socio-cultural competence.

***Simon Greenall, Oxford January 2004***

The activities in this summary come from *People Like Us* and *People Like Us Too*, by Simon Greenall, Macmillan Language House.