Four Questions on the Culture of ELT and TTELT[1]

Edit H. Kontra[*]

ELTE, Budapest, Hungary

1. Introduction

Much has been said about the role of culture in English language teaching (ELT) and recent years have seen a revival of the issue of incorporating cultural information *in* the English as a foreign language (EFL) syllabus. At the same time, another aspect of cultural influence is calling for the attention of the profession, namely the culture *of* ELT and TTELT (teacher training for ELT). The aim of this paper is to raise awareness in this latter, often neglected or overlooked issue and to formulate four basic questions for teacher educators to respond to. In the following, I am going to elaborate on these four questions and highlight their importance with references taken from the literature. Although I am also going to present some of my personal answers, my main aim in writing this article was to invite teachers and teacher educators to think about these issues and formulate their own answers.

2. From culture 'in' to culture 'of'

Experts place the beginning of an overt treatment of culture in the foreign language syllabus in the 1970s (Kramsch 1995, Willems 1996). Willems attributes this shift to the introduction of communicative principles in language teaching in the 1970s and early 1980s. Van Ek's *'Threshold Level'* (1975) and *'Threshold Level for Schools'* (1976) were indeed written to provide language learners "in a very large part of Europe with an objective in terms of practical communicative ability" (van Ek, 1976 p. 3). The 'threshold level' defines what learners minimally need to be able to do in the foreign language in order to not only 'survive' linguistically as tourists but to also be able to establish and maintain social relations. In Willems's terms, this attention to the foreign culture in the 1970s and 1980s meant no more than giving factual information about the target culture and providing useful colloquial phrases to help along a visitor in the foreign land. Therefore, Willems points out the need for moving beyond this simplified treatment of culture towards a contrastive analysis between the social context of linguistic phrases in the target culture and comparable contexts in the home culture.

The 'Functional-Notional Approach' gained popularity and inflicted radical changes in European EFL in the 1970s when "the cultural component of language teaching came to be seen as the pragmatic functions and notions expressed through language in everyday ways of speaking and acting" (Kramsch, 1995 p. 87). In including pragmatic awareness in language teaching, students are made familiar with common patterns in the target culture for communicating more than what is said. For people who share a common first language and culture there is a convention that certain referring expressions will be used to identify certain entities on a regular basis. Teaching this however means imposing native norms on the non-native speaker, which is rather purposeless and artificial if English

---

[1] An early version of this paper was presented at HUSSE 4.
[*] Corresponding author. Email: ehkontra@ludens.elte.hu

is used in non-native/non-native communication. Yule's '*Pragmatics*' (1996), for instance, is admittedly written from an assumed middle class Anglo-American background, and the author acknowledges that what he says is completely irrelevant from a cross-cultural point of view, that is if the interlocutors come from different cultures, so he calls attention to the importance of research in interlanguage pragmatics.

Kramsch (1995) points out the inadequacy of the Functional-Notional Approach by saying that this trend was based on an "illusionary universality of speech functions based on shared human needs" (p. 87). She even goes further in asserting that a pragmatic approach can be imperialistic "if it assumes that universally shared basic human needs automatically correspond to universally shared ways of thinking and talking about those needs" (p. 87). In trying to avoid this kind of 'linguistic imperialism' we are faced with the dilemma expressed in the following question:

> *1) To what extent should non-native learners be held to native speakers' conventions of language use and interpretation? (Kramsch, 1995)*

In response to the above question, I fully agree with Kramsch's suggestion that instead of trying to bridge cultural differences and aim for the universal, dialogue should be started to explore the differences between people's values and attitudes. Her observation is that at present language teaching is still operating on a relatively narrow conception of both language and culture, and while the cultural elements which are incorporated in EFL teaching reinforce and enrich the linguistic material, the real shift in attitude to teaching language *as* culture has not been made yet.

It is often stated in the literature that English is primarily used for communication between non native speakers (NNS) (Holliday, 2005; Jenkins 1996), which suggests another important question for language teachers to think about:

> *2) If we teach language as culture, whose culture is involved in international (i.e. NNS/NNS) communication?*

There is no such thing as culture-free language, which means that language cannot be taught "without teaching the way in which that language expresses the world view of a social group or society that speaks it" (Kramsch, 1991. p.35). However, a neutral, universal 'culture' embodied in English as an international language cannot be forged and the absurdity of fusing the cultures of all English speakers into one 'international culture' and imposing that on others is also clear (Pennycook, 1994). This fact has implications both for language teaching and language teacher training as shall be seen below.

3. From ethnocentrism to interculturalism

In the 1990s, the increased interest in English as a *lingua franca*, gave birth to a strong trend towards standardizing English teaching as well as English teacher training programs in Hungary. Standardization, however, means strengthening uniform features at the cost of disregarding local characteristics. This is achieved through materials and personnel as "most of the so called authentic knowledge in the areas of Second Language Acquisition (SLA) and ELT is manufactured in the native-English-speaking countries and disseminated as 'received wisdom' to others through published scholarly material and through the educational involvement of others in those countries" (Nayar, 1997 p. 22).

Many have voiced their concern about the strong tendency to shape ELT and TTELT according to the norms prevalent in the major English speaking countries, such as Great Britain and the USA (Ballard, 1996; Coleman, 1996; Holliday, 1996; Shamim, 1996). This process is taking place by direct and indirect influence: foreign aid programs are set up to promote the teaching of English, foreign language teaching materials are being used over locally produced materials, foreign teachers are employed, teacher trainers are 'imported,' and training books are British or US publications. As a small local example the reading list offered to Eötvös University students preparing for their EFL methodology exam could be mentioned: out of the 32 books and articles there are only five written or co-authored by Hungarians. Since foreign aid programs are set up with little awareness of local needs, visiting teachers are not trained for local expectations and the books that they bring along are usually

produced for the international market not for a particular region or country. All this is creating an Anglo-American style ELT and TTELT in which the local needs, conventions, cultural traditions or the contrastive treatment of languages have little or no place.

Hungary, along with the rest of East-Central Europe, is experiencing a strong influence towards a linguistic and cultural homogenization akin to the unsuccessful efforts of the Soviet communist regime at homogenization in the region, though the means are different. In the present case of Anglo-American linguistic influence the control over a multi-million ELT enterprise is at issue (Nayar, 1997). Pennycook (1994) points out that the successful marketing of any new approach or method has "major financial implications," yet "the export of applied linguistic theory and of Western trained language teachers constantly promotes inappropriate teaching approaches to diverse settings" (p. 159). It should also be noted that the students enrolled in English teacher education programs in English speaking countries are not all native speakers, a large number are international students most of whom, after receiving their degrees, return to their home countries to teach. Liu (1998) finds that these students are hit particularly severely by the ethnocentrism prevalent in teacher education programs, which do not recognize the different needs of international TTELT students while they are in the program, and they disregard the difference in the socio-economic conditions, educational ideologies and systems in which international students will have to operate upon return to their respective home countries.

> In spite of their different backgrounds and needs these students are usually given the same training as their native-speaker peers. This often results in a gap between what they learn while they are abroad and what they face in their teaching back home. (p. 3)

While inappropriately trained non-native teachers are left to their own devices in bridging this gap, Liu informs us that many native English speaking teachers (NESTs) who go to teach in Asia and find themselves insufficiently prepared for the job leave before their contract is fulfilled (Liu, 1998).

The pressure towards linguistic and cultural homogenization may give birth to hostility and resistance on the part of local training institutions, universities or national educational authorities in order to preserve those trends in their programs which give them their distinctive character and which have developed over the years in response to observed and well defined local needs. The campaign staged in the late 1990s for the future of the foreign language exams offered by the Hungarian State Foreign Languages Examination Board, popularly called 'Rigó utca' (Idegennyelvi Továbbképző Központ, 1997) could be mentioned as an example. It was easily predictable that the traditional bilingual exams would be endangered by the growing, monolingual foreign competition as "certain, rather predatory examination boards in Western Europe will see it as being to their advantage to come in, wipe out 'Rigó u.' examinations by offering high quality products at sub-economic prices" (Fekete, 1997 pp. 36-37). All this in spite of the acknowledged fact that "in a small country which depends on international trade and whose language is rarely spoken by foreigners," foreign language learning is essentially of a bilingual nature (Crighton, West & Walter, 1993 p. 40). Research evidence shows that learners are concerned about a monolingual approach to ELT in Hungary: they resent it if their teachers cannot make links between L1 and L2, be it in the area of grammar, lexis or translation, and emphasize their need for a bilingual approach (Kontra, 1998).

Alptekin and Alptekin (1984) assert that NESTs reflect the trends of their own culture in foreign language pedagogy and believe that "the teaching of culture is a *sine qua non* of teaching the target language while the host country's educational policies which are related to social goals [..] are normally ignored or marginalized" (p. 22). Pennycook (1994) explains the situation from a NEST point of view as follows:

> It is not that as English language teachers we are necessarily either overt messiahs or duped messengers, but rather that the constant advocacy of certain teaching practices that have become bound up with the English language necessarily represents a constant advocacy for a particular way of life, a particular understanding of the world. (p. 178).

Reflecting on experiences with Peace Corps volunteers in a Tunisian context, Bahloul (1994) makes the point that NESTs misunderstand their role if they "come to the host nation to build their own system of education" (p. 6). This may sound self evident to non-native colleagues, but not necessarily to NESTs themselves. The lack of understanding with which an American teacher educator

(Schleppegrell 1994/95) responded to Bahloul's above mentioned article is cogent evidence in support of the true need for a culture-sensitive attitude in ELT and TTELT. First the author argues that asking NESTs "to adopt methods that they believe to be ineffective and calling this cross cultural makes a mockery of professionalism" (p.4). Then, referring to memorization and grammar teaching she goes on to say that "foreign teachers [...] cannot be expected to adopt techniques and approaches that are completely alien to their own values and training" (ibid.). Why not, one might want to ask. Schleppegrell's reasoning implies that *teachers* cannot be expected to adopt techniques and approaches that are alien to them but *learners* can. After all, if there is a mismatch, one party inevitably has to change, so if not the teacher, then it has to be the students. Schleppegrell may not have realized that her response represents the kind of authoritarian, top-down approach that graduates of western teacher education programs are taught to condemn. I believe that in a culture-sensitive teacher education program the faculty would follow Reid's (1995/1996) advice to "abandon methodological dogmatism and demonstrate ways in which [...] more traditional approaches can be useful" (p. 3). This takes us to the third question to be posed:

> *3) What do EFL teachers need to know in order to better accommodate the culture-based needs of their learners?*

Some of the factors to be considered are the students' motivational construct (see Dörnyei 1990), norms and values in society, school culture, learning styles and learning strategies. Holliday (2005) takes a critical stand when discussing how current 'Western' methodologies advocate *learner autonomy* and *self-directed learning*, pointing out that these methodologies consider students autonomous when they behave in a way which conforms to an image of the native speaker and his or her culture and consider silent, i.e. not speaking, only listening students *passive* and therefore lacking the ability to learn effectively. Several authors highlight the fact that the Communicative Approach itself is associated with an Anglo-Saxon view of communication (Sullivan, 2000).

4. From communicative competence to intercultural communicative competence

Current discourse in ELT and TTELT is filled with such overlapping terms as multicultural, cross-cultural, or intercultural. When I speak about a culture-sensitive approach, I mean intercultural and not transcultural or multicultural. "An intercultural aspect means the end of the approach which sees language teaching as a pedagogical process aimed at changing the learner's behavior by injecting new norms and values into it" (Alptekin and Alptekin, 1984 p. 22). The term is important because it expresses certain reciprocity, and emphasizes that in culture-sensitive communication both interactants need to make efforts for a successful contact. These efforts include awareness of differences, willingness to negotiate social content, knowledge and skills in how to do this, and readiness to adjust.

Meyer (1991) puts forward the view that intercultural competence is neither a result of foreign language teaching nor a sign of high linguistic competence. It is rather related to self-identity, namely "the expression of self identity in a communicative situation which transcends national barriers" (p. 157). Mariet (1990) offers a definition which could serve as a slogan: "Interculturalization is not folklore nor simply another 'academic hobby' [...]: it is the new European way of life" (p. 99).

In language teaching, the adopting of an intercultural attitude means that communicative competence as the goal of language teaching becomes intercultural communicative competence. This can be achieved by adding a further, an intercultural dimension to the teaching of pragmatic and sociolinguistic competence. Willems (1991) asserts that "success in inter-cultural communication depends on the willingness of both interactants to make the contact work" (p. 204). To make his point he discusses pragmatic and textual errors in what he calls 'transcultural' communication. As an illustration of the inter-relatedness of our culture with our communicative competence Harding and Riley (1986) is cited:

> If you make grammatical mistakes or you use the wrong words, people think you *speak* badly: but
> if you make cultural mistakes, they think you *behave* badly. [emphasis in original] (p.191)

Also Willems (1991) points out that near-native linguistic accuracy can, in fact, backfire if it is not matched by an equal level of socio-pragmatic awareness:

the more correct and fluent the language directed at us is, the more difficult it becomes to realise that the breaking of social rules may be attributed to the fact that our interlocutor is foreign [...] Our problem is that while we tend to be prepared to negotiate referential meaning, we often shy away from discussing social meanings. (p. 197)

While language teachers can have no influence on the behavior of native speakers in a NS/NNS interaction, they can make it clear for parties in an international, NNS/NNS communication situation that cooperation and mutual will on the part of the interactants to clarify social meaning before passing judgments is highly necessary. Discussing social meaning does not equal 'learning about' nor 'adjusting to' the social meaning implied in a certain utterance by native speakers. Discussion means reciprocity, and the need for a culture-sensitive approach means acknowledging this reciprocity and teaching learners the negotiating skills necessitated by socio-cultural differences. In this relationship the learner does not aim at identification with the foreign culture but is entitled to keep his or her identity. This brings us to the fourth important question:

4) What can English teacher educators do to introduce an intercultural aspect in TTELT?

In my view, the possible answers can be grouped into two areas: change in attitude to the role of English as a foreign language and change in teacher education practices.

5. The role of English

It is necessary that teachers of English accept the fact that – for better or worse – English is now a world language and the means of international communication, which has consequences for the classroom as well:

- Since English is mainly used as a lingua franca in NNS/NNS interaction, this is the communicative situation that learners primarily need to be prepared for;
- Any NNS has the right to preserve and show his or her cultural identity when speaking or writing in English;
- As a consequence, the foreign language syllabus has to give equal weight to discussing the learners' own culture and the culture of the L2 being learned.

The new role of English has consequences for English teacher education as well. In order to prepare novice teachers appropriately for teaching English as a lingua franca, teacher education programs, among others, need to accomplish the following:

- Raise awareness of the diversity of EFL learners in terms of motivation, learning needs, learning styles, learning strategies, and general school-culture;
- Enrich the methodology curriculum with courses on teaching interlanguage pragmatics and sociolinguistic competence;
- Foster the development of teaching methods which allow foreign language students to learn the way they learn best;
- Initiate and support the development of national and international examinations and evaluation systems which accept that native-like or near-native linguistic expression is not necessarily the ideal for an EFL learner.

This last point can be supported with a personal example. One time, at the end of a language practice class, I was returning the essays of my students and I happened to tell to one of them that what he had written was fine, I understood what he meant to say, but his essay was not a piece of English writing because in English one does not write the way he does, and one does not structure a piece of writing like that. Following which he stared at me and said, "But I *want* to write like a Hungarian." Having thought through the issues addressed in the four questions above, I believe he was right. If we consider English as a lingua franca, a means of international communication, we must accept that its non-native users want to communicate in that language without having to give up any

part of their socio-cultural identity and we should adjust our teaching and training practices accordingly.

References:

Alptekin, C., & Alptekin, M. (1984). The question of culture: EFL teaching in non-English speaking countries. In R. Rossner, & R. Bolitho (Eds.). (1990). *Currents of Change.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Bahloul, M. (1994). The need for a cross-cultural approach to teaching EFL. *TESOL Journal, 3*(4)*,* 4-6.

Ballard, B. (1996). Through language to learning: Preparing overseas students for study in Western universities. In H. Coleman (Ed.). *Society and the language classroom*, pp. 148-168. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Coleman, H. (Ed.). (1996). *Society and the language classroom.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Crighton, J., West, R., & Walter, A. (1993 December). World Bank Foreign Language Examinations Consultancy - Hungary. Phase III - November 1993. Report and draft recommendations. Budapest: Confidential report.

Dörnyei, Z. (1990). Conceptualizing motivation in foreign language learning. *Language Learning, 40,* 45-78.

Fekete, H. (1997). An interview with Richard West. *Testing Matters, 2* (2), 34-38.

Harding, E., & Riley, P. (1986). *The bilingual family: a handbook for parents.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Holliday, A. (2005). The struggle to teach English as an international language. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Idegennyelvi Továbbképző Központ. (1997). *Tények és vélemények. Az állami nyelvvizsga és az akkreditáció kérdése.* (Facts and opinions. The state language exam and the question of accreditation). Budapest: ITK.

Jenkins, J. (1996). Native speaker, non-native speaker and English as a foreign language: time for a change. *IATEFL Newsletter, 131,* 10-11.

Kontra, E.H. (1998). The Need for a culture-sensitive approach to teacher education in EFL. Unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, University of Glamorgan.

Kramsch, C. (1995). The cultural component of language teaching. In: M. Bensoussan, I. Kreindler, & E.M. Aogain (Eds.). Multiculturalism and language leaning. *Language, Culture and Curriculum, Special Issue, 8* (2)*,* 83-92.

Liu, D. (1998). Ethnocentrism in TESOL: Teacher education and the neglected needs of international TESOL students. *ELT Journal, 52*(1), 3-10.

Mariet, F. (1990). Interculturalising the French educational system: towards a common European perspective. In D. Buttjes, & M. Byram. (Eds.). *Mediating languages and cultures: Towards an intercultural theory of foreign language education.* Clevendon, Philadelphia: Multilingual Matters.

Meyer, M. (1991). Developing transcultural competence: case studies of advanced foreign language learners. In D. Buttjes, & M. Byram (Eds.). *Mediating language and cultures.* Clevendon, Philadelphia: Multilingual Matters.

Nayar, P.B. (1997). ESL/EFL dichotomy today: Language politics or pragmatics? *TESOL Quarterly, 31* (1), 9-37.

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

Reid, J. M. (1995/1996). Let's put the "T" back in TESL/TEFL programs. *TESOL Matters, 5* (6), 3.

Schleppegrell, M. (1994/95). Cross-cultural EFL teaching: A reader responds. *TESOL Journal, 4* (2), 4.

Shamim, F. (1996). Learner resistance to innovation in classroom methodology. In H. Coleman (Ed.). *Society and the language classroom*, pp. 105-121. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Sullivan, P. (2000). Playfulness as mediation in communicative language teaching in a Vietnamise classroom. In J.P. Lantolf (Ed.). *Sociocultural theory and second language acquisition,* pp. 115-132. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

van Ek, J. A. (1975). *Systems development in adult language learning, the Threshold Level.* Strasbourg: Council of Europe, Council for Cultural Cooperation.

van Ek, J. A. (1976). *The Threshold Level for modern language learning in schools.* Strasbourg: Council of Europe, Groningen: Wolters-Noordhoff-Longman.

Willems, G. M. (1991). Transcultural communicative competence and the growth of European citizenship [1]. *European Journal of Teacher Education, 14* (3), 189-212.

Willems, G. M. (1996). Foreign language study for intercultural communication. *Multicultural Teaching, 14* (3), 36-40.

Yule, G. (1996). *Pragmatics.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.