

## Culture-The fifth language skill

### What do we mean by 'culture'?

Many teachers quote the Dutch psychologist Geert Hofstede's maxim 'Software of the Mind', the subtitle of his 2005 book 'Cultures and Organizations'. What culture covers is the commonly held traditions, values and ways of behaving of a particular community. It includes what we used to call 'British and American life and institutions', 'daily life' and also cultural artefacts, such as the arts or sports. This is all interesting and sometimes useful knowledge and it is often included in textbooks.

However, there is also another level of understanding, of culture. This is how you develop cultural sensitivity and cultural skill. This covers how you build cultural awareness, what qualities you need to deal successfully with other cultures, and how to operate successfully with people from other cultures. This is often considered to be a business skill for adults, such as international sales managers or explorers. But if you think about it there is a set of skills also needed by refugee kids, 'third culture kids' following their parents as they are posted around the world, and students going abroad on gap years before university or overseas study grants. Therefore we could argue that the teaching of culture in ELT should include these things:

- **Cultural knowledge**  
The knowledge of the culture's institutions, the Big C, as it's described by Tomalin and Stempleski in their 1995 book 'Cultural Awareness'.
- **Cultural values**  
The 'psyche' of the country, what people think is important, it includes things like family, hospitality, patriotism, fairness etc.
- **Cultural behaviour**  
The knowledge of daily routines and behaviour, the little c, as Tomalin and Stempleski describe it.
- **Cultural skills**  
The development of intercultural sensitivity and awareness, using the English language as the medium of interaction.

### Culture – the fifth language skill

Why should we consider the teaching of a cultural skills set as part of language teaching and why should we consider it a fifth language skill, in addition to listening, speaking, reading and writing? I think there are two reasons. One is the international role of the English language and the other is globalization.

Many now argue that the role of the English language in the curriculum is a life skill and should be taught as a core curriculum subject like maths, and the mother tongue. The reason for this is globalization and the fact that to operate internationally people will need

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to be able to use a lingua franca. For the next twenty to thirty years at least, that language is likely to be English.

That means that English will be a core communicative skill and will need to be taught early in the school curriculum.

Many countries now introduce English at eight years old and many parents introduce their children to English at an even younger age, using 'early advantage' programmes.

The second argument is globalization itself. You could say, 'We are all internationalists now'. We are or will be dealing with foreigners in our community, going abroad more, dealing at a distance with foreigners through outsourcing or email, phone and video-conferencing. And this isn't just for adults. Kids are interchanging experience and information through travel, keypal schemes and networks like Facebook. This is the time to develop the intercultural skills that will serve them in adult life.

Up until recently, we assumed that if you learned the language, you learned the culture but actually, it is not true. You can learn many cultural features but it does not teach you sensitivity and awareness or even how to behave in certain situations. What the fifth language skill teaches you is the mindset and techniques to adapt your use of English to learn about, understand and appreciate the values, ways of doing things and unique qualities of other cultures. It involves understanding how to use language to accept difference, to be flexible and

tolerant of ways of doing things which might be different to yours. It is an attitudinal change that is expressed through the use of language.