

# Western Culture and the Teaching of English as an International Language

ONE OF THE MOST COMPLEX PROBLEMS IN TEACHING ENGLISH AS AN INTERNATIONAL language (EIL) is determining the cultural basis of EIL. For some, the learning of any language necessitates learning how to use the language correctly and appropriately according to native speaker norms. For others, however, an international language by definition is not linked to any particular culture. Smith (1976), for example, argues that in reference to an international language:

- a) non-native speakers do not need to internalize the cultural norms of native speakers of that language,
- b) an international language becomes “de-nationalized,” and
- c) the purpose of teaching an international language is to facilitate the communication of learners’ ideas and culture in an English medium.

(For a discussion of additional features of an international language, see McKay 2002.)

In many countries today there is tremendous interest in learning English for international purposes, yet there is ambivalence toward the linking of EIL with the culture of countries where English is spoken as a native language. To exemplify this ambivalence, I begin by discussing several countries in which educators have rejected the inclusion of Western culture and values in the teaching of English. Then I demonstrate how, ironically, at the same time, many of those countries include Western culture and values in their approved textbooks.

### **Attitudes toward western cultures**

Currently, in many countries throughout the world, there is tremendous pressure to learn English. This pressure is evident in a variety of ways. To begin, in many countries, English is a required subject beginning in middle school and continuing through high school and is often one of the areas tested on college entrance examinations. In addition, many international corporations are encouraging their employees to develop their English skills by providing English training on the job.

Along with the pressure to learn English comes concern about how English should be taught and what role culture should play in the teaching of English. Many language educators support the inclusion of a cultural component in the teaching of English. Adaskou, Britten, and Fahsi (1990), for example, summarize the following arguments for having a cultural component in language teaching: it can promote international understanding, deepen an understanding of one's own culture, facilitate learners' visits to foreign countries, and motivate learners.

Prodromou (1992), on the other hand, disputes the value of including cultural content in language teaching materials. He bases his opinion on the results of a survey he gave to Greek students, mostly young adults (studying in private language institutes and at the British Council Teaching Centre), regarding what they believe should be the subject matter of English lessons. The two top choices of topics were the English language and science and society. The reaction to cultural content was quite mixed. Whereas 60 percent wanted to study British life and institutions, only about a quarter of the students wanted to study either

American or Greek life and institutions. Prodromou hypothesizes that the students' interest in British life and institutions may be due to students' belief that if they knew more about British life, they would do better on the British-based Cambridge exam. If that is the case, overall these students did not find learning about culture, either their own or others, very motivating.

In other contexts, there appears to be support for including a cultural component in language teaching materials, but only if the materials deal with the local culture. For example, in examining the Moroccan situation, Adaskou, Britten, and Fahsi (1990) found that the inclusion of culture, specifically Western culture, in teaching materials is not motivating or beneficial to students. Drawing on interviews with Moroccan teachers, Adaskou, Britten, and Fahsi maintain that, in general, Moroccan educators believe that including information about Western culture, and then inviting cultural comparisons, contributes to students' discontent with their own culture. Teachers also pointed out that some patterns of behavior that exist in English-speaking social contexts are ones that many Moroccans would prefer their young people not see. Finally, the teachers believe that students will be more, not less, motivated to learn English if the language is presented in contexts that relate to their lives as young adults rather than in the context of an English-speaking country.

In Chile, the Ministry of Education has decided that it would be more motivating for students to focus on their own culture and country. Hence, the Ministry has designed a series of textbooks for the public schools entitled *Go for Chile* (Mugglestone, Elsworth, and Rose 1999, 2000) that implements the Ministry's learning objectives. *Go for Chile* features a group of students from various countries onboard a ship sailing along the coast of Chile. The scenario of the sea voyage enables the textbook writers to deal with Chilean places and concerns. Thus, the book is filled with information about various areas of Chile and issues facing the country.

One of the strongest rejections of the inclusion of Western culture in EIL teaching materials appears in a Japanese bestseller entitled *Why the Japanese people are no good at English* by Suzuki Takao. Suzuki (1999) offers several

reasons why he believes the teaching of English should be separated from information about Western cultural values. First, he argues that Japan as an international power has no need to teach Western culture. Secondly, he believes that Japan must fight against the subtle form of Western imperialism that suggests the need to emulate everything Western, including the English language. For him, such emulation is a form of mental colonization. He says:

When Japanese come into contact with foreigners [Westerners, specifically, Americans], they have been historically predisposed to accepting that person's way of thinking and acting, that person's value system, and even that person's habits. And if they seem better than one's own, they don't hesitate to imitate them and take these differences in as their own, even hoping to become like them. This is the mental predisposition to what I referred to earlier as auto-colonization. (p. 145)

For Suzuki, promoting Western cultural standards in the use of English often results in Japanese people having a feeling of inferiority.

As illustrated by the examples above, manifestations of attitudes toward including Western culture in EIL teaching materials vary by country. Some countries emphasize making the local culture the focus of the content, while other countries reject any inclusion of Western culture.

### **Western culture and EFL textbooks**

While educational leaders in some countries are hesitant to include Western culture in English language teaching, many of the textbooks adopted in these countries do include Western characters and values. Japan is a case in point. Although the majority of characters in textbooks approved by the Ministry of Education are Japanese, those that are not Japanese are Western characters. In examining current high school English oral communication textbooks, Shimako (2000) found that although Japanese culture was the main content used in the books, when foreign cultures were mentioned in the texts, it was in the context of visitors to Japan (almost exclusively Western visitors) being introduced to Japanese culture by Japanese. By and large, the main Western culture presented was American.

This tendency to focus mainly on Western English-speaking cultures is also evident in junior high school textbooks approved by the Japanese Ministry of Education. This is demonstrated by the chart on the next page, which lists the countries of origin of the non-Japanese characters in such textbooks.

Perhaps more interesting than the nationalities of characters in textbooks is how characters are used in the textbooks. In many countries where Western characters are introduced in textbooks, it is often in the context of presenting differences between Western culture and local cultures, often accompanied by an emulation of Western culture and traditions. Examples in the following discussion demonstrate this tendency. All of these examples involve the issue of gender roles, and all of them appear in textbooks approved by the local Ministry of Education.

In one Moroccan textbook (*English in Life*), students are introduced to an American engineer, Steve Lynch, and his family of three children. In terms of gender roles, the family is fairly traditional because the wife, Barbara, doesn't work outside of the home. However, in one of the readings, the family's activities are described in such a way that traditional gender roles are questioned.

#### **Example One:**

After work Steve comes back home. He likes to be with his family in the evening. Usually he or Nancy [his daughter] cooks dinner for the family. Then they wash the plates. Barbara just likes to eat. She doesn't like to work in the kitchen. She thinks it takes a lot of time and it isn't interesting. Steve never criticizes her. Do you think he's right? (page 41)

In this case, although the wife plays a traditional role in that she doesn't work outside of the home, nonetheless, she is unusual because she doesn't participate in the traditional female role of making meals. Steve, on the other hand, by undertaking domestic duties, illustrates a male role that is often encouraged in Western cultures. Hence, not only does the book depict gender roles advocated by many Western cultures, but it also opens a discussion of gender roles by asking whether or not Barbara should be criticized for not playing a traditional female role.

TEXTBOOKS	WESTERN ENGLISH-SPEAKING CULTURES	OTHER CULTURES
<i>Total Active Communication</i>	USA (5 characters)	
<i>Columbus</i>	USA (4 characters) New Zealand (1 character)	Korea (3 characters)
<i>New Crown</i>	USA (3 characters) England (1 character)	China (1 character) Kenya (1 character)
<i>New Horizon</i>	Australia (3 characters) Canada (1 character) USA (1 character)	
<i>One World</i>	Canada (1 character) USA (1 character)	Brazil (1 character)
<i>Sunshine</i>	Canada (1 character) USA (1 character)	Brazil (1 character) China (1 character)
<i>Total English</i>	USA (2 characters)	Kenya (1 character)
	<b>Total: 25 characters</b>	<b>Total: 9 characters</b>

**Source:**  
Watanabe, S., R. Ogasawara, and R. Goris, eds. 2002. *Total Active Communication 1*. Tokyo: Shubunkan. ☞ Tojo, K., ed. 2002. *Columbus 21 English Course 1*. Tokyo: Mitsumura Toshō. ☞ Morizumi, M., ed. 2002. *New Crown English Series 1*. Tokyo: Sanseido. ☞ Kasajima, J., H. Asano, Y. Shimomura, T. Makino, and M. Ikeda, eds. 2002. *New Horizon English Course 1*. Tokyo: Tokyo Shōseki. ☞ Sasaki, T., ed. 2002. *One World English Course 1*. Tokyo: Kyoiku Shuppan. ☞ Shimaoka, T. and S. Aoki, eds. 2002. *Sunshine English Course 1*. Tokyo: Kairyudo. ☞ Horiguchi, T., ed. 2002. *Total English New Edition 1*. Tokyo: Gakko Toshō.

A presentation of Western values regarding gender roles is evident later in this same textbook when the daughter, Nancy, is discussing her future with her Moroccan friend, Latifa. The following is an excerpt from this dialogue:

**Example Two:**

Nancy: Do you want to see this magazine, Latifa? It's all about different possible careers.

Latifa: No thanks. I've decided on my career. I'm going to be a university professor.

Nancy: Oh, that's nice. Congratulations. What university are you going to teach at?

Latifa: I haven't decided yet. Probably the biggest one. What about you, Nancy? Have you decided on your career?

Nancy: No, not yet. I'm still thinking about it.

Latifa: Have you thought about a career in medicine?

Nancy: Hm. I'd like to be a doctor. But no, I can't. I'm not intelligent enough.

Latifa: That's true. Well, have you considered a career in business? That doesn't need much intelligence.

Nancy: Oh really? Yes, I'd like to be a business woman. But no, it's impossible. I'm too lazy for a career in business.

Latifa: Well, have you thought about journalism? Some journalists don't work very hard.

Nancy: Oh yes! I'd like to be a journalist. But...I don't know...I don't write well enough.

Latifa: It's difficult, isn't it? You aren't intelligent, you aren't hard-working and you don't write well. What careers have you thought about?

Nancy: Well, I'd like to be a gym teacher – you know, physical education.

Latifa: Oh. I see yes...Well, I must get back to work. See you.

Nancy: Bye, Latifa. (pages 156–57)

The dialogue presents a complex account of gender roles. Although the interaction suggests that it is important for a woman to have

a career, a value often promoted in Western contexts, the Western figure appears to be incapable of managing most careers. Hence, Nancy provides a far from exemplary role model. On the other hand, Latifa, a Moroccan, appears quite determined to pursue a successful professional career. Dialogues like this one demonstrate that even though there appears to be little support among Moroccan educators for the inclusion of Western culture in teaching materials, textbooks do, in fact, include examples of Western values, often presented in an ambivalent manner.

Presentation of cultural values is less ambivalent in the Chilean context mentioned earlier. Although characters from many countries are portrayed in the *Go For Chile* textbooks, the gender roles depicted reflect typical Western values. Most of the families presented in the textbook include a mother who works outside of the home in a professional job. For example, in the family of one character, the mother is a secretary and the aunt is a dentist. There is no mention of a family in which the mother works in the home taking care of the family.

Perhaps the most vivid example of the promotion of Western gender roles appears in the following dialogue from a Japanese textbook.

**Example Three:**

Rye: Jim?

Jim: What.

Rye: Is your father always doing the dishes like that?

Jim: Yes. My parents take turns cooking and doing the dishes.

Rye: My father never helps with the housework. He's too tired after a long day's work.

Jim: I think the Japanese work too much and too long. What do you think?

Rye: I think so too. But people are taking more holidays than before. My father stays home longer.

Jim: What does he do on holidays?

Rye: Usually, he just relaxes. But you know what? He started to learn cooking.

Jim: Does he cook well?

Rye: Yes, he cooks very well. Everything is very very well-done.

(Source: *Echo*. 1997. Tokyo: Sanyusya, Lesson 18, "Housework," as cited in Shimako 2000)

The dialogue is a vivid example of what Suzuki (1999) refers to as auto-colonization, in which Japanese are depicted as emulating and accepting Western values. In the dialogue, Rye not only appears to apologize for aspects of his own culture, agreeing with Jim that Japanese "work too much and too long," but he quickly points out that his father is emulating Western traditions by learning to cook. As if this is not sufficient evidence of a type of auto-colonization, he goes on to say that his father, however, has not managed to undertake this Western pattern very effectively since everything he cooks is "very very well-done."

### Conclusion

As Smith (1976) argued almost 30 years ago, the fact that English has become an international language suggests that English no longer needs to be linked to the culture of those who speak it as a first language. Rather, the purpose of an international language is to describe one's own culture and concerns to others. The examples in this article demonstrate that, in many countries, the teaching of English is becoming much more closely aligned with the host culture as those countries use local characters, places, and issues as the content for their teaching materials. On the other hand, a closer look at some of these materials demonstrates that, in more subtle ways, English is still being linked to the culture of English-speaking countries. First, in many cases where characters other than local figures are included in teaching materials, the characters are from Western English-speaking countries. These depictions persist even though, in many instances today, second language speakers of English use EIL to communicate not with native speakers of English but with other second language users of English. By not portraying second language speakers of English in dialogue with one another, educators are missing an opportunity to provide learners with models of second language speakers of English communicating effectively with each other. Secondly, and perhaps more importantly, the use of Western characters in some language teaching materials is illustrating in subtle ways that the use of English necessitates the acceptance of Western values. It would be unfortunate if dialogues such as those noted above left students with that

impression. For, as Smith claimed long ago, only when English is used to express and uphold local culture and values will it truly represent an international language.

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