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Teaching American culture to ELs: A literature review

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Introduction

Language and culture are intimately related. This is because language transmits understanding, and understanding is shaped by beliefs and values. When someone learns a new language, there is a corresponding set of cultural information. The information may vary from how to choose the most appropriate word to understanding a country's history and customs. This literature review will focus on English Learners (ELs) and the ways they learn about American culture in their English-learning programs.

The literature in this review comes from four types of sources related to teaching English as a second language: scholarly articles, English as a second language (ESL) manuals and textbooks, written narratives about ELs, and information from seven original interviews. The participants include four students of Southern Adventist University's ESL program, one former ESL student, one TESOL (teaching English to speakers of other languages) student at Southern, and one Southern ESL professor. Each participant will be referred to with a pseudonym. Interviews were unstructured, and questions were specific to each participant. Participants were asked questions about their experience with learning or teaching English as a second language. Their responses reveal their exposure to different ESL methods. The purpose of integrating interviews along with the textual sources was to enrich the information in the texts with personal accounts.

This review will follow a topical and somewhat chronological progression of four ESL methods: assimilation, accountability, pragmatics, and cultural responsiveness. Each section will include literature describing that method and relevant experiences shared during the interviews.

Assimilation

Teaching ELs culture

Eick and Valli (2010) identify assimilation as the predominant ESL educational practice in the 1920s, in connection with the large wave of European immigrants to the United States. The assimilation strategy was characterized by a focus on socializing immigrants through teaching them English and American culture, and seeking to eliminate and stigmatize the use of their original language. During this period, producing patriotic Americans from immigrants was the goal of education. Researchers Eick and Valli (2010) quote a New York teacher who described her role as, “transforming a ‘cityful of Russians, Turks, Austro- Hungarians, Sicilians, Greeks into good Americans” (p. 61). Although the assimilation strategies were often cruel, they also connected language with culture identity. Students learned by reading patriotic stories and narratives about famous Americans. Teaching American cultural information was a way to support language instruction and sought to replace both the students’ original cultures, as well as their languages.

An example of an EL who received assimilation instruction is Sui Sin Far’s (2009) titular character in her short story, *Mrs. Spring Fragrance*. In the early 1900s, Mrs. Spring Fragrance arrived in the U.S. for an arranged marriage and “she was unacquainted with even one word of the American language” (p. 97). After five years, her husband claims that “There are no more American words for her learning” (p. 97). Although the short story does not describe the process Mrs. Spring Fragrance undergoes to learn English, it does demonstrate how her “Americanization” changes her cultural beliefs. Far used the term “Americanized” to describe Mr. and Mrs. Spring Fragrance.

One of the major ways that cultural education has changed Mrs. Spring Fragrance’s Chinese culture is her support of romantic love over family commitments. Her “Americanization” has overpowered her belief in the traditional Chinese system of arranged

Teaching ELs culture

marriages, and she even helps a friend evade an arranged marriage. Another example is her response to a lecture, “America, the Protector of China!” (p. 101). She completely accepts the patriotic message and encourages her husband to ignore racial discrimination and the unfair detainment of Chinese immigrants, including his own brother.

Mrs. Spring Fragrance is an EL who received assimilation instruction. She learned English proficiently, but she also lost elements of her original culture. Mrs. Spring Fragrance's assimilation education changed her traditional beliefs about love and marriage. It also swayed her political views, effectively making her a very patriotic citizen who ignores abuses against her own people.

Another example of assimilation methods comes from a story set later in time, *How the García Girls lost their accents* (Alvarez, 2010). It tells the story of a family with four sisters who flees to New York from the Dominican Republic in the 1960s. Although this is much after 1912, the girls face significant pressure to assimilate. Their neighbors and classmates call them derogatory names like “spics” and tell them to “go back to where you came from!” (p. 171). Eventually, the girls take their assimilation so far as to lose not only their Spanish accent, but their ability to speak Spanish. They also depart significantly from their parents’ cultural values. The father even severs his relationship with the youngest daughter after she violates his norms, and becomes sexually involved with her boyfriend. When one girl returns to the Dominican Republic years later, her relatives remind her that, “this is not the states” (p. 6). They imply that the process of American acculturation has left her less able to navigate life in her native country.

Another EL narrative which takes place even later in history also demonstrates elements of the assimilation methods. *American Born Chinese*, a graphic novel by Gene Luen Yang

Teaching ELs culture

(2006), interweaves three stories about identity. The assimilation present in the story doesn't come from teachers as it does in other examples. Rather, it comes from another minority member.

A Chinese-American boy named Jin moves into an all-white community where he is bullied. When a student, Wei-Chen, arrives from Taiwan, Jin bullies him in return. Wei-Chen approaches Jin in Mandarin because his English is very poor, and Jin responds with "You're in America. Speak English." (p. 37). This represents a danger in teaching American culture along with English. If American culture is presented as superior, those who socialize better can censor and mistreat new-comers the same way they themselves were mistreated. Despite this, the boys become best friends. Jin continues to acculturate Wei-Chen by teaching him "hip American phrase like 'don't have a cow, man'" and taking him to McDonald's (p. 102). When Wei-Chen expresses Taiwanese values, Jin tells him not to be such an FOB (Fresh off the Boat). Later, Jin betrays Wei-Chen's friendship. That night he dreams of an elderly Chinese lady who once told him, "It's easy to become anything you wish so long as you're willing to forfeit your soul" (p. 36). Since he has "forfeited" his soul, Jin is magically transformed into what he wishes to be: an all-American teenager. The transformation, in a way, represents the fullest possible assimilation in which the EL adopts American culture so completely that he loses every part of his past self.

Even in a recent study by Tedick and Wesley (2015), elements of the attitudes behind assimilation were present. The research included two-way immersion programs, which means all students learn both English and a second language, in this case, Spanish. Although the program is designed to teach both languages, researchers have found that English receives privileged use

Teaching ELs culture

in the classroom setting, both by students and by teachers. This could communicate to ELs that speaking English is more valuable than their first language (L1).

Accountability

Eick and Valli (2010) identify the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) as the context for the “accountability era” (p. 55). The accountability methods are characterized by a need to “teach to the test,” that is, perform well on formal evaluations, and also an attempt to make English learning culturally neutral by excluding explicit American cultural information (Eick & Valli, p. 67). An important part of Eick and Valli’s conclusion in their research is that NCLB has been detrimental to effective language education and restricts teachers too much. Teachers have also lost considerable autonomy. TESOL programs use “plug-ins” and “pull-outs,” both which isolate the ELs from the larger group (p. 65). In “plug-ins,” a specialist comes to the room to work with the ELs but draws them aside. In “pull-outs” the ELs leave the classroom to work with a specialist individually or with other ELs. In addition to isolating ELs from native speakers, these methods are “culturally sterile” (p. 68).

Harcourt's (2001) *ESL Manual with Transition for Success in English* had a similar “culturally sterile” appearance. This ESL textbook focuses entirely on teaching grammatical content. There is no section explicitly sharing facts about American culture, but cultural information is nonetheless part of the book. The exercises involve children who have picnics with their family, two-story houses, and pets. They eat fish, salad, and cookies, and they drink lemonade. The textbook talks about seasons and activities like building snowmen. The animals in the book are found in the U.S. It also mentions meal times, like breakfast at seven o’clock (p. 59).

Interview content relating to Accountability

Teaching ELs culture

The facts in these examples may be taken for granted in America but could be a culture shock for foreign students. For example, An ESL student named Jane talked about her difficulty adjusting to a change in climate. “Weather is very different. In D.R. [it] is summer the whole year. Here the weather changes every day. We don’t have winter, we have a little breeze” (Jane, personal communication, Nov. 6, 2017). Jane also listed the fact that Americans have supper “early” as a fact she learned about American culture in school. Another ESL student, Stacy, made a similar comment. “I learned time of supper, which here is 5-6:00 instead of 8-9:00 like in D.R.” (Stacy, personal communication, Nov. 6, 2017).

Although not culturally “sterile,” Avery describes cultural information in Southern’s ESL program as only present in a limited way. There is some content, such as prompts that contrast students’ cultures with American culture. One of her classes involves texts which she describes as “not really ‘culture-y’ types of reading” (Avery, personal communication, Nov. 15, 2017). As an example, Avery mentioned a recent reading on bed bugs and spiders. The class discussed pests in the students’ countries and looked at photos, but the content is not explicitly designed to communicate information about American culture.

These ELs also experienced the “teaching to the test” element of accountability style in their ESL programs before coming to Southern. Obtaining a high score on the TOEFL is necessary for international students. Jane, for example, spent six months in an intensive TOEFL preparation course. It was a small, challenging class. Stacy and another ESL student, Rachel had similar experiences.

Teaching to the test is difficult in part because of what Sandberg and Reschly (2011) discuss in their study on evaluating ELs. When considering the EL as a test-taker, instructors must be aware that the test will apply to students differently based on “The extent to which an

Teaching ELs culture

individual has acquired the language of the majority and embraced its values and customs” (p. 31). ELs with more acculturation fit better into Western assessment modes. ESL professor Avery identifies standardized exams as a challenge for her students also, but describes it as primarily a reading speed issue.

In the students’ ESL classes, cultural information is still present. However, it is present in a subtle way, such as it is in the ESL manual, or outside of class material. The ESL students mentioned that they would also ask about life in America during TOEFL class. Rachel says her teacher would tell the students about American people and holiday celebrations. Stacy’s professor also covered etiquette for the U.S., such as keeping an appropriate amount of personal space.

Avery shares a similar experience with the ESL classes she teaches at Southern. Her class sometimes “get[s] on sidetrack notes where someone will ask about the way things work here or something someone said that they didn’t understand” (Avery, personal communication, Nov. 15, 2017). She has dedicated class time to explaining the grading system and addressing students’ practical concerns. The class also talks about issues of social adjustment, which are very tied to culture. Students express difficulty with making friends in a new culture.

Pragmatics

The next strategy for teaching English, pragmatics, focuses entirely on practical use of the language, and incorporates American cultural information when it can be directly applied, such as in etiquette.

The use of pragmatics is relatively recent. Older textbooks, such as Giannotti and Szwarczewicz’s (1996) focus on more traditional information about American culture. It covers the following topics: geography, history, government, famous Americans, holidays, vacation,

Teaching ELs culture

and patriotic songs. Each chapter contains texts and listening activities along with questions for testing knowledge. Most of the questions focus on reporting facts. Missing from the table of contents are topics like etiquette, conversation patterns, or how to approach elders. Although this text is several years old, ESL students interviewed reported learning, and missing, similar topics. Melody says, “We only cover cultural information in history class: the presidents, native Americans, but not actual life in America” (Melody, personal communication, Nov. 8, 2017).

Such topics are necessary, at least according to Limberg (2016), who dedicates his research to how ELs in Germany learn to apologize in class and with textbooks. According to Limberg, teaching speech acts “should be based on rich, meaningful and authentic input and tasks,” (p. 700). He also identifies teachers’ need to be aware of what the textbook does and does not cover so they can supplement accordingly. For example, Limberg found that many textbooks lacked context for the apologies. ESL student Melody struggles with using apologies for this reason. Her English classes did not teach her how to apologize. “I just heard sorry,” she says, “Now I hear excuse me. I don’t know when to use which” (Melody, personal communication, Nov. 8, 2017).

Interview content relating to Pragmatics

Interviews with ESL and TOEFL students revealed a range of exposure to pragmatics methods. Former ESL student, Derek, had a positive experience with pragmatic instruction in the U.S. “Perhaps they don’t teach you [about ethnic diversity] in the classroom specifically, but it’s part of what you live [experience]” (Derek, personal communication, Nov. 5, 2017). Derek spent several months as an exchange student in a boarding high school in Virginia. He also learned from life in the dorm. “You learn to apply every day” (Derek, personal communication, Nov. 5, 2017).

Teaching ELs culture

Derek's experience is what Echevarría, et al. (2017) recommends in their TESOL manual, *Making content comprehensible for English learners: The SIOP model*. According to the chapter on practice and application, "we learn best by involving ourselves in relevant, meaningful application of what we are learning" (p. 187). The authors suggest a variety of application strategies: graphically organizing new information, generating solutions to real problems, holding a debate, and discussing information in class and writing an opinion afterwards.

ESL student Jane talks about the difficulty of learning without application. She attended a total of four "institutes," or schools, with English learning programs. "I stopped, forgot, and had to re-learn," Jane says (Jane, personal communication, Nov. 6, 2017). The class that helped improve her speaking abilities was an intensive TOEFL preparation program. "I became more confident because we were talking a lot," (Jane, personal communication, Nov. 6, 2017). Echevarría and Vogt also point out that, "the language processes-reading, writing, listening, and speaking-are mutually supportive" (p. 188). Some students learn to speak faster than they learn to read or vice versa, but learning skills in either field contributes to the growth of language skills overall.

Teaching students how to use the appropriate phrase is part of the instructor's role, according to Limberg (2016). Once they have the information, ELs can choose whether or not to apply it. TESOL student Roger reports using this methodology:

Your job is to teach. I don't think that teaching is necessarily forcing someone to follow your opinions; it's teaching someone to think for themselves and be aware of the information and how to apply it practically. I don't push my students to say good

Teaching ELs culture

morning, but I assess them to know that they know how to do it (Roger, personal communication, Nov. 5, 2017).

Roger says that, depending on the students' needs, there are many ways to transmit this practical information, "You just have to be creative" (Roger, personal communication, Nov. 5, 2017).

Culturally responsive

That creativity becomes important when the ELs have different cultures from the professor and each other. The culturally responsive strategy focuses on involving the EL's original language and culture in their English-learning experience by being conscious of cultural differences, valuing the L1, and incorporating American cultural information with the original language and culture as a reference point. There is an awareness among ESL educators of their role as cultural interpreters. Even if their main curriculum objectives are not driven by cultural study, this interpretative attitude reflects the methodology of culturally responsive practices.

Eick and Valli (2010) also use the term "cultural mediator" for ESL professors (p. 55). "In this sense," they say, "the teacher as cultural mediator molds perceptions of what it means to be a U.S. citizen" (p. 55). However, the culturally responsive method recognized the need for adapting practices to for ELs cultural difference, not just teaching them facts about the U.S. Echevarría and Vogt (2017) give an example of this concept in their TESOL manual. When students and teachers have different "schemata," or pattern of thought to organize types of information, it can create confusion. Instructors can lessen this confusion by becoming more aware of their own cultural assumptions. Having done so, they need to build connections between what the students do know and the new information they are learning in the new language. One way to do this is to have students discuss what they already know about a topic.

Teaching ELs culture

This also helps teachers identify possible mismatched schemata based on which information students volunteer.

Lin (2017) recommends a similar approach in her study, *Teaching EFL writing: An approach based on the learner's context model*. The teacher needs competence to teach ELs about the relationship between their L1 culture and the culture of the language they are learning so they can become effective writers. The phrase “context model” refers to teaching ELs, “how to use language patterns to accomplish coherent, purposeful prose” (p. 143). Lin found that students initially had a hard time understanding the context model. Mapping the elements into four questions: “why to write, what to write, to whom to write, and how to write,” helped it make sense (p. 152). Students learned the context model because they could connect it with prior knowledge.

Fenner and Snyder (2017) take the concept of connecting existing and prior knowledge a step further in their TESOL manual. According to their four guidelines for “culturally responsive teaching,” teachers need to value the ELs’ home languages and cultures instead of seeing them as hindrances to learning. The second guideline, placing students at the center of the learning, means that instructors chose goals and content based on the students’ needs and backgrounds, and that they make those goals understandable and approachable for the students.

In order for instructors to ensure goals are approachable, they may consider using assessments like the one developed by Show Mei (2015). She evaluated writing difficulties in 20 volunteer ELs. Participants rated word choice as the most difficult (p. 240). Part of the reason for this is that one word in the first language (L1) can translate into several words in the second language (L2), and students are unsure which is appropriate. In her implications section, Show Mei insists that students need information about “English conventional and cultural knowledge”

Teaching ELs culture

in order to choose the right word (p. 245). Teachers should present word-choosing strategies and provide examples of how similar words are used differently.

Fenner and Snyder's (2017) guideline number three, valuing students' languages, cultures and backgrounds, suggests that teachers make lessons applicable to their students, incorporate the home language into instruction, and include the students' families as learning support. The last guideline, simultaneously challenging and supporting students, says that teachers should set high goals but give their students enough support to reach them. This guideline also directs teachers to discuss topics of inequality and to include history from various perspectives.

Show Mei's (2015) study is relevant here also. Part of the students' backgrounds is how their culture uses rhetoric. "Adjusting to American thought patterns" was the second greatest difficulty for Show Mei's participants (p. 240). Although they are writing in English, students still form ideas in their L1 and use rhetorical strategies common in their cultures. Show Mei suggests using examples of common errors stemming from linguistic differences and "systematically" teaching aspects that remain problematic (p. 245). Teachers should also help students transition from the organizational patterns in their L1 to American organization.

Galetcaia and Thiessen (2010) faced a similar difficulty with culturally different thought patterns in ELs. The researchers teach university critical thinking workshops for ELs. They discovered that "critical thinking" was not a part of students' schemata. In order to solve this issue, they had to get past the terminology to explain the content.

The researchers concluded that engaging methods for teaching critical thinking worked better than just presenting theory and information. This is to say, just presenting theory did not work at all. Students should learn by practice and personally relate to the text before they analyze. The text the researchers used involved contention over a prize, so each student could

Teaching ELs culture

apply their own value system to judging who was right. This mobility made the exercise culturally responsive, and the students naturally engaged in a critical review without stressing about applying explicit theories and frameworks.

Interview content relating to culturally responsive teaching

Suntharesan's (2013) research on English teaching in Sri Lanka could compare Galetcaia and Thiessen's unsuccessful attempt to teach critical thinking with only theoretical information and no consideration for cultural differences to the issue of "teaching language first, and introducing culture later" (par. 1). The interviews with ELs revealed their level of cultural awareness made an important difference in their English learning experience. Their experiences correspond with Suntharesan's argument that language cannot be taught without culture because culture is so integral to the use of the language. "If cultural information is not taught as a part of communicative competence," he says, "complete communication is impossible" (par. 2).

Although the author recognizes the need for students to build cultural competence by learning about, "the history, geography and institutions of the target language country," he also points out that cultural learning can be understood as a process (par. 4). Under this model, students need to develop ways to interpret "cultural acts" in their context, instead of just collecting facts (par. 4). "It is deplorable," Suntharesan writes, "to note that insufficient attention is paid to the development of intercultural awareness" (par. 5). Several of the ELs interviewed reported that the amount of intercultural awareness they developed, or failed to develop, had a significant bearing on their English learning experience.

An example of this lack of awareness could be the difficulty ELs face in navigating the new social environment. All of the ESL students interviewed for this review reported that making friends in the U.S. was a challenge. Melody hesitates to approach others because

Teaching ELs culture

American people “are not as interested” (Melody, personal communication, Nov. 8, 2017). Jane identifies American people as reserved and Rachel says they are not antisocial, but not friendly either. Stacy struggles with taking new friendships slowly and feeling like she can act like herself. “You meet new people easily in D.R.,” she says, “Here it is step-by-step... When I meet someone, I try to be more pacific [calm]. In D.R. I don’t do that. But you don’t want to make someone uncomfortable” (Stacy, personal communication, Nov. 6, 2017).

The information these ELs have gathered about American people falls under Suntharesan’s category of cognition, one of the three elements of teaching intercultural communication competence. Cognition refers to knowing information about the L2 culture, especially for use as conversational currency and as a basis for understanding parts of the culture.

However, if ELs do not understand the “underlying rules of behavior...communication may breakdown” (sec. 2 par. 1). To avoid this, students need to understand the reasons behind cultural behaviors and attitudes. Suntharesan suggests “cultural assimilations,” an activity where students read a scenario and choose from a list of possible explanations. The purpose is to explain the value system behind behaviors and practices and to make students more sensitive in their interpretation and evaluation of other cultures.

The next element, affective learning, recognizes that cross-cultural learning involves, “adjustment, anxiety and uncertainty” and may cause ELs to feel “complex emotions such as confusion and anger” (sec. 3 par. 1). Melody seemed to be displaying some of these feelings as she spoke about striving for her goals in the U.S. “Being here I think I make a big step because I already started,” she says, “I don’t know a lot of things here, I’m learning. I’ve seen my friends who have lived here for longer, they have what they want. Even if you have to work they have a *recompensa* [reward]” (Melody, personal communication, Nov. 8, 2017). Suntharesan says

Teaching ELs culture

teachers need to “enable their students to effectively manage their emotional reactions” and suggest they do so with “discussions, simulation, [and] role-play” (sec. 3 par. 1) (sec. 3 par 2).

Lastly, behavioral learning teaches students how to observe other’s behaviors and “discover, interpret, relate and adapt to the requirements...of different contexts” (sec. 4 par. 1). Former ESL student Derek gained experience in behavioral learning during his time in the U.S. “Something that is dry for me,” he explains, “can be normal for an American. That feeling of ‘I know how to answer’ gives you a plus” (Derek, personal communication, Nov. 5, 2017).

Conclusion

The four methodologies for teaching English covered in this review vary in approaches and reported effectiveness. The first method, assimilation, was the most widely experienced by interview participants and the characters in EL narratives. Although perhaps effective in eliminating accents, the cultural learning dimension is imbalanced. In *American-born Chinese*, Yang even compares total assimilation to the character selling his soul.

In contrast, the accountability methodology does not attempt to replace ELs’ original culture in this way, but also does not provide them with the cultural information necessary for navigating life in the new country. Teachers whose curriculums do not include cultural information find themselves getting on “sidetrack notes,” like Avery and her class, because ELs have cultural questions anyways.

Pragmatics appears to be a more current method. For example, a current university TESOL student, Roger, reported he learns about and uses those methods. A lack of practical application can be detrimental, as Jane’s example demonstrates. Of four English programs, only the one that made her practice her speaking abilities proved effective in helping her become a more confident speaker.

Teaching ELs culture

The last and most current method, culturally responsive, has several strong supporters. According to Suntharasen, “It is obvious that the integration of cross-cultural awareness into language teaching is immensely significant in promoting students' communicative competence” (sec. 11 par. 2). The culturally responsive method, although perhaps more demanding, provides students and instructors with more holistic language development. The method teaches each party about the other, but also helps them understand themselves more. It goes beyond learning vocabulary to provide ELs with the social understanding behind words. Melody, although perhaps not familiar with the methodology, expressed a desire for its educational outcomes. “I want to learn the basis of the word,” she says. “I want to know the meaning of the word, when you use it, and how it is different from other words” (Melody, personal communication).

Considering the evidence in the literature and the interviews, I present a hypothesis for further research: conducting culturally responsive assessments on ELs and adjusting the curriculum to their needs would improve their reported satisfaction with the ESL program and their ability to use English in an American context. Replicating Show Mei’s study on writing difficulties for ELLs, for example, could be an approachable way to begin collecting relevant information.

Learning a new language is more than acquiring a vocabulary and syntax. Languages come with a cultural understanding of how, when, and whom to communicate with. This new language and culture does not need to disqualify the EL’s L1. However, respecting the home culture is impossible without making curriculum culturally responsive. Culturally responsive teaching transforms the original culture into a foundation for understanding the new one. Instead of putting off teaching culture, instructors who recognize and respond to all of the cultural

Teaching ELs culture

systems present, including their own, can help students achieve not only language proficiency but also intercultural competence.

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