

Teaching Culture in Literature in the ESL/EFL Classroom

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The present paper is based on part of the work carried out at the University of East Anglia/NILE, Norwich U.K. on a teacher trainer bursary jointly funded by the British Council and the Italian Ministry for Foreign Affairs and was presented as a workshop at the 18th British Council National Conference held in Palermo (Italy) in March 1999.

Introduction

The aim of this work is to design an in-service training (INSET) plan to be run for ESL/EFL teachers and based on the importance of teaching Culture in Literature within the ESL/EFL classroom. Why train ESL/EFL teachers to teach Culture in Literature? Valdes (1986:137) claims:

It is simply accepted as given that literature is a viable component of second language programs at the appropriate level and that one of the major functions of literature is to serve as a medium to transmit the culture of the people who speak the language in which it is written.

Furthermore, it is possible to agree with Kramsch (1993:1) that:

Culture in language learning is not an expendable fifth skill tacked on, so to speak, to the teaching of speaking, listening, reading, and writing. It is always in the background, right from day one /.../ challenging [the good language learners']

In the literature, theoretical tenets seem, therefore, to underline the urge to escape the *language-culture* dichotomy which unduly simplifies the issue raised.

Didactically, the planning of this course can be justified by the need to use language for successful interaction with members of another sociocultural background. In this perspective, hitherto neglected within the ESL/EFL curriculum, trainees develop awareness of the importance of contextualising language by reference to its cultural connotations. This may possibly shift trainees away from the view of underestimating culture as an adjunct to the four skills towards the social/anthropological values embodied in language.

Bearing this in mind, the present work will be divided into three sections:

1. the theoretical framework: an overall model which determines the basic parameters for designing the present INSET plan;
2. the implementation of the INSET plan: the core of the present work which relates the theoretical model to the teacher training situation;
3. Overview: a brief conclusion which analyses the desired outcomes of the INSET implementation.

Section One : The Theoretical Framework for the INSET Plan

The present INSET plan will be designed according to the following parameters, which seem properly to cover the main issues dealt in foreign language teacher education courses (cfr. Wallace, 1991; Woodward, 1991; Richards & Nunan, 1990).

1.1. The Theoretical Parameters

Table 1 provides an outline of the main parameters required.

Table 1: The INSET Plan Parameters

- Aim:
 - What is the training course intended to achieve?
- Setting:
 - Where will the course be held?
 - What type of course will it be?
 - What particular need for the course is there? (government/educational policy statements);
- Target Group:
 - What kind of trainee is the course designed for? (trainee's teaching experience, professional training level, attitude to work situation, background knowledge);
 - What admission requirements are demanded?
- Content:
 - What are the major strands and the objectives to be dealt with?
 - How do they relate to each other?
 - How is the content organised?
- Procedure:
 - What is the purpose of each unit of content?
 - How will it be managed? (time, method, activities, materials, classroom management etc.)
 - Which techniques will be employed? (awareness activities, self-assessment, introspection, experimentation, reflection).
- Feedback:
 - What opportunities will be given to the trainees to evaluate the process of learning? (formative evaluation).
- Evaluation:
 - What indications of success/failure?
 - How will the trainer evaluate such outcomes? (summative evaluation).

Table 1: The INSET Plan Parameters

By attempting to answer the issues illustrated in Table 1, it will now be feasible to set up the profile for our case.

Section Two: The Implementation of the INSET plan

2.1. The profile

- Aim:
 - To sensitise the trainees to the importance of integrating culture in the ESL/EFL learning process;
 - To develop in the trainees an understanding of the importance of raising cultural awareness and promoting cross-cultural interaction;
 - To encourage the trainees to use English literature for cultural purposes through the study of appropriate texts.
- Setting:
 - The course will be held in any educational institution (school, university, teachers' association).
- Course type:
 - Short intensive in-service course designed to meet language education policy, which sets the goal of broadening the ESL/EFL learner's cultural horizons. The course consists of 4 sessions (3 hours each) for a total duration of 12 hours.
- Target Group:
 - It is intended for a group of 12 in-service teachers with mixed teaching experience in different types of upper secondary schools mainly in a monolingual environment with heterogeneous professional training levels. Their background knowledge about culture ranges from common stereotypes to direct contact experiences.
- Admission requirements:
 - In-service upper secondary school teachers.
- Content:
 - The major strands to be dealt relate respectively to the four sessions:

1. Enhancing cultural awareness
 2. Working with culture (events and institutions)
 3. Working with culture (values, patterns and attitudes)
 4. Placing culture in context (culture in literature)
- The sessions are interrelated in that they lead the trainees from the essential exploration of the term culture towards intercultural literary interpretation.
- Procedures:
 - Approach: task-based; co-operative learning;
 - Materials: OHP, board, handouts, worksheets, photocopies, drawing paper, transparencies, markers, photos/pictures.
 - Classroom management:
 - Individual (I/W)
 - Pair Work (P/W)
 - Group Work (G/W)
 - Plenary (P)
 - Techniques:
 - Brainstorming, elicitation (trainees' knowledge)
 - Problem-solving tasks (trainees' application)
 - Mind-mapping, self-reports, discussions and debates (trainees' reflection)
 - Feedback:
 - Opportunities will be given through discussions, self-assessment, awareness activities
 - Evaluation:
 - Brief pre- and post- session reports
 - Evaluation sheet on course outcomes

2.2. Implementing the plan

A sample plan of two sessions - Session One: *Enhancing Cultural Awareness* and Session Four: *Placing culture in context (culture in literature)* will now be provided. The purpose of sampling the first and the last sessions of the course is to enable the reader to grasp the overall idea of the course structure which may be represented as in Figure 1.



Figure 1. The course structure

2.3. Sample of Session One

Session One: Enhancing cultural awareness (3 hrs.)

Activity No. 1

- Aim: to develop awareness of the various meanings which can be ascribed to the term "culture".
- Time: 60 minutes
- Material: OHP, board, transparencies, markers
- Procedure:
 - P : Introduction: trainer presents the general outline of the course and its importance (5 mins.)
 - P : Trainer socializes with trainees: Gathers information from each person: name, teaching place and course expectations (10 mins.)
 - Trainer asks the group to focus on the term "Culture" and writes the word on the board as a spider web diagram. (cfr. figure 2)
 - Brainstorm: I/W: 10 words/expressions related to the term "culture" (5 mins.) Possible outcomes: music, stereotypes,

food, sports, education, government, holidays, beliefs, hobbies, history. (cfr. Robinson, 1985).

- Activities:
 - P/W : share and justify choices (10 mins.)
 - G/W: (four trainees in each group) share information and prepare transparency on their conclusions (20 mins)
 - P : Each group reports ideas and comments to the whole group (10 mins.) Trainees have feedback on their I/W.



Figure 2 Spider Web diagram

Activity No. 2

- Aim: to stimulate discussion about one's own culture
- Time: 30 minutes
- Material: no special needs
- Procedure:
 - Trainer asks half group to list all the positive things about own culture* and other half the negative ones - trainees: (P/W) (10 mins.) Possible outcomes: positive: friendliness, good food, fashionable people, artistic cities; negative: chaotic bureaucracy, "tangentopoli", mafia.
 - G/W: Cross-over groups: ideas from the different groups are shared without the need for a feedback session. (10 mins.)
 - P: Awareness activity: Discuss how many of the listed things correspond to common stereotypes about own ethnic group (10 mins.)

* In our case Italian culture is considered.

Break (15 mins.)

Activity No. 3

- Aim: to reflect on the differences between one's own culture and that of the target language
- Time: 15 minutes
- Material: Pictures/Photos of stereotyped British and national* images: Brits queuing up at bus stop, weather in England, tea, Royal Family, Tower Bridge pizza/spaghetti, Colosseum, mafia boss, Pavarotti, Italian fashion.
- Procedure:
 - P: Trainer elicits information about the images (5 mins.)
 - P: Keywords on cultural elements are elicited and written on the board
 - Associations are made to determine cultural areas/patterns (10 mins.)
- Feedback: Awareness of the elements of culture vs. stereotypes.

* In our case Italian images are considered.

Activity No. 4

- Aim: to identify the importance of culture in the EFL learning process
- Time: 60 minutes
- Material: Handouts; Drawing paper and pens
- Procedure:
 - G/W: Handout sheet A to one pair and sheet B to other. (Short quotations have been selected to trigger reflection on the issue without involving trainees in excessive reading which may influence personal viewpoints).
 - P/W: discussion on importance of quotation (5 mins.)

- report to other pair (10 mins.)
- P: Sharing ideas on G/W (10 mins)
- G/W: drawing on the importance of culture in EFL learning (15 mins.)
- P: Groups comment on drawings (10 mins)
- Feedback: Trainees design a mind map on culture (cfr. Figure 3). The map should be sufficiently articulated at this stage, providing good retrospective reflection and self-evaluation on Session One. (10 mins.)

Table 2 Handouts: Session 1 Activity 4

Sheet A

"Culture in language learning is not an expendable fifth skill tacked on, so to speak, to the teaching of speaking, listening, reading, and writing. (Kramsch, 1993:1)

Sheet B

/Culture/ is always in the background, right from day one /.../ challenging [the good language learners'] ability to make sense of the world around them". (Kramsch, 1993:1)

Table 2 Handouts: Session 1 Activity 4

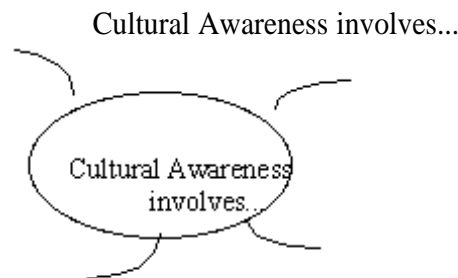


Figure 3 Mind map on Cultural Awareness

Figure 3 Mind map on Cultural Awareness

2.4. Sample of Session Four

Session Four: Placing culture in context (culture in literature) (3hrs)

Activity No. 1

- Aim: to consider literature as a medium which conveys the culture of the target group
- Time: (30 minutes)
- Material: Handouts A & B
- Procedure:
 - G/W: Handout A to one pair; handout B to other (cfr. Table 3)
 - P/W: discussion on quotations (10 mins.)
 - Report to other pair (10 mins.)
- Feedback:
 - P: sharing ideas on G/W (10 mins.)
 - Expected key points:
 - The link between language-literature-culture
 - The selection of literary texts: cultural free vs. cultural bound
 - Reading comprehension: linguistic vs. cultural difficulties
 - Methodology on teaching culture

Table 3 Handouts: Session 4 Activity 1

The aim of the language teacher is surely to teach language, not culture. /.../ The solution, therefore, is to select literary texts which are culturally universal or, at least culturally neutral, and which allow us to concentrate exclusively on language. (from Lazar, 1993:66)

Our students' comprehension is frequently impeded not by linguistic features in a literary text, but by cultural ones. We owe it to them to help them understand what these might be. Language can never be divorced from culture... (from Lazar, 1993:66)

Table 3 Handouts: Session 4 Activity 1

Activity No. 2

- Aim: to enable trainees to consider cultural aspects when using literary texts
- Time: 40 minutes
- Material: Transparency of Adaption from Lazar's (1993) list (cfr. Table 4), OHP
- Procedure:
 - Brainstorm:
 - I/W: list 5-10 cultural aspects which ought to be considered fundamental for literary text comprehension (10 mins.)
 - P/W: share and back up choices (10 mins.)
 - P: I/W and/or P/W report list items to whole group (10 mins.)
 - Feedback:
 - Trainer shows Lazar's (1993) list.
 - Trainees check I/W-P/W lists: tick items and/or add. (10 mins.)

Table 4 Adapted from Lazar's (1993) list of cultural aspects in texts

- Objects or products that exist in one society but not in another
- Proverbs, idioms, formulaic expressions which embody cultural values
- Social structures, roles and relationships
- Customs/rituals/traditions/festivals
- Beliefs, values, superstitions
- Political, historic and economic background
- Institutions
- Taboos
- Metaphorical/connotative meanings
- Humour
- Representativeness - to what slice of a culture or society the text refers to
- Genre
- Written language status

Table 4 Adapted from Lazar's (1993) list of cultural aspects in texts

Activity No. 3

- Aim: to elicit various strategies to deal with learners' cultural problems with texts
- Time: 20 minutes
- Material: Photocopy of global strategies list
- Procedure:

- P/W: trainees jot down strategies required to help learners overcome cultural problems with texts (10 mins.)
- P: On OHP build up a list from P/W comparison (10 mins.)
- Feedback: Photocopy of global strategies list
- Expected outcomes:
 - Personalise theme/topic of the text
 - Gloss cultural information: terms/expressions etc.
 - Stimulate cultural information inference
 - Brainstorm cross-cultural comparison
 - Make associations around cultural connotations

Break (15 minutes)

Activity No. 4

- Aim: to implement activities 2 and 3 with reference to a sample text
- Time: 60 minutes
- Material: Sample Text (cfr. Appendix A)
- Procedure:
 - P/W in G/W:
 - 1 P/W: go through text slowly and note down cultural problems possibly experienced by learners
 - 1 P/W: read text and write down possible strategies to facilitate learners' reading. (20 mins.)
 - G/W:
 - Share P/W discussion (10 mins.)
 - Match strategies/cultural problems related to text (5 mins.)
 - Prepare transparencies: grid (cfr. Table 5) on G/W (15 mins.)
 - P: G/W report grid to whole group (10 mins.)
 - P: Follow-Up- Trainer elicits overall course issues by asking: How has culture been considered in relation to literature?
- Expected outcomes:
 - Literature - medium of culture
 - Focus on cultural aspects of literary texts
 - Strategies to overcome cultural problems with texts
 - Selecting texts properly
 - Planning tasks/activities with cultural awareness of the selected texts
- Evaluation: Trainer hands out Evaluation Sheet (cfr. Appendix B)

Table 5 Session 4 - Activity 4: Grid with expected outcomes	
Cultural Items	Overcoming Strategies
Ayers Rock	provide gloss
plastic chairs/vast inner space	make associations
dusted coolabah tree	cultural inference
Dreamtime Experience	make cultural comparisons (e.g. myths)
tribal man	cultural inference

Section Three: Overview

In the present inset plan an attempt has been made to introduce a range of teaching and learning techniques in order to follow the key aspects involved in the process of teacher education. The outcome of the process is illustrated in figure 4:

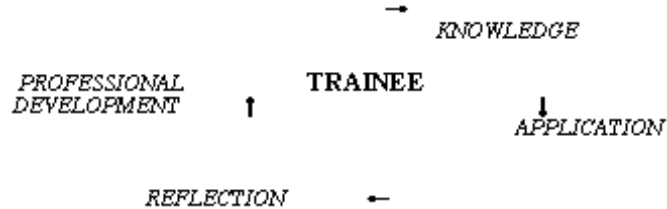


Figure 4 The process of teacher training

In sum, figure 4 gives us an overview of the present INSET Plan. The trainees have worked through the three phases - knowledge , application and reflection to attain professional development. Firstly, the trainee has received new *knowledge* from the teacher trainer and has brought his/her own background knowledge to the course. New information is related, elaborated and stored in the trainee's schemata. Such acquired knowledge is practically *applied* and experienced in the course of trainees' teaching.

Impressions, intentions, feelings etc. are not left unconsciously stored but trainees have developed an awareness of the learning process, of their professional performance, of the positive and/or negative outcomes. In so doing, trainees *reflect* retrospectively on the overall process. This process has led trainees to the stage of consciously knowing not simply *what*, but more importantly, *how* things have occurred, enriching their *professional competence*. In this view, it seems that the main thrust of the present INSET Plan has been to adhere to the fundamental principles underlying the reflective approach to teacher training.

Appendix A: Sample Text

Inside Ayers Rock

By Les Murray, Subhuman Redneck Poems, 1996

(Editor's Note: This text has not been included since it is under copyright protection. Contact Redneck Press, if you would like the text.)

Appendix B: Evaluation Sheet

Please complete

- What is your overall impression of the course?
- Did you expect the course to help you reflect on what you do when teaching?
- How relevant and effective has the course been with respect to your professional development?
- Did you prefer any specific activity/session? Why?
- Did you enjoy working with other members of the group?
- After a session, how did you review the content and/or process?
- What would have you added/changed in the course?
- Which part of your professional competence has the course mainly enhanced? (knowledge, application, reflection, all)
- Did you back up the course with reference reading?
- What is your attitude to Teaching Culture after this training experience?

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<http://iteslj.org/Lessons/Plastina-CultureInLiterature/>