

## The importance of cultural studies in the teaching of English

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The study of cultural aspects of any given country has often been neglected when teaching a foreign language. This is no more apparent than in the teaching of English, whether it be in a private institution, school or university, here in Colombia. Cultural studies of any country are of the utmost importance, due to the fact that in order to be able to understand how the people and therefore the language function in these countries, one needs to first come to terms with the context in which these people live and communicate and how they develop socially, emotionally, historically and politically.

The purpose of this paper is to show how the students of, in this particular case English, can be exposed to the different afore-mentioned aspects of the 'Anglo' culture. As well as this, it is proposed to dispel some myths surrounding this culture so that the teaching of cultural studies within the EFL context can be more accurate.

### 1. LITERATURE

Literature is probably the most common and one could say efficient, if used correctly, way of understanding any culture. However, it is very important to choose the correct literature e.g. Who is the author?, When was the novel/story written?, for whom is it written?.

The importance of the author in so much as the seriousness of his or her writing is fundamental in the selection of a text. In

some cases the author could not be totally objective in his analysis of certain cultural, historical or social events due to a personal bias or an external influence which has affected his judgement.

Just as important in the selection of an article is the era from which it comes, i.e. if it is a historical or contemporary piece of writing. This is of utmost importance because cultural or social implications change with the passage of time. So, therefore, one must be objective, for example when one is reading an article from the seventies, one should take into account the historical, social and cultural changes that have occurred since then. This is manifested no more apparently than in works of literature that were written at the beginning or middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century e.g. *Animal Farm* by George Orwell or *The Importance of Being Earnest* by Oscar Wilde or that were written in previous centuries, e.g. novels by Charles Dickens or plays by William Shakespeare.

The other facet of determining if an article or text is of cultural value to the English student is seeing for whom the text was written. This influences the validity of the text in so much as one must ascertain if the reader is supposed to have an understanding of cultural studies of the country in question or in fact is ignorant of many of the social, political, historical or cultural connotations that are implied and *not* described in the article. Therefore, one could say that certain articles require a

certain level of understanding, not so much in language or culture content but in language or culture context.

This brings us to the question of what kinds of writings the EFL student should try to read so as to be able to develop his cultural understanding of the 'Anglo' world.

For a historical point of view the best kind of text without a doubt is the novel. A serious and good quality novel from another time, i.e. not contemporary, is the perfect aid in understanding cultural, social, historical and political connotations from that period.

For social and political questions, there are many different kinds of texts available to help the student understand their implications. For example, newspapers, magazines, cultural text books and novels, but at the same time taking into account for whom they are intended. All these sources are available on the internet. See <http://englishculture.about.com> or [www.newsunlimited.co.uk](http://www.newsunlimited.co.uk).

## 2. LANGUAGE

The study of language and culture go hand in hand. One cannot exist without the other, one complements the other. Therefore one could say that the importance of culture in the learning of a language is fundamental and vice versa. Social, historical and political events are the history and the roots of any language.

Language comes from the development of cultures; this could be from a natural process throughout time, i.e. traditions, customs and attitudes, or it could come from a sudden imposition of traditions and beliefs by an external force. This is apparent in Colombia, for example, when

you look at its history. Before the conquest of this continent by the Spanish, a society had developed, thus implying culture. It had its own traditions, beliefs and language. However, with the arrival of the Spanish, these conditions changed with the imposition of European beliefs. This model is true for every country in the world, and therefore should be taken into account when looking at different cultures.

The importance of culture in the learning of English is extremely valid. This was mentioned briefly in the introduction and therefore here will be given some examples on how to take advantage of this. To be able to understand exactly why people say certain things one must first look at the speakers social and educational background. This is due to the fact that people tend to use different vocabulary and expressions resulting from a different level of society and education. It is a popular misconception among students that the more 'slang' used the better. A language in its purest and therefore most elegant form is on the whole better. These so-called tendencies more often than not apply to the spoken aspect of the language, as when written it is seen as very unsavoury to use slang expressions. When writing in English it is advisable to always use the most elegant way to express oneself even if it is an informal letter to a friend or a relative. This doesn't mean that the author has to use formal language, but it is recommended to use 'choice language', which means that he/she should always be respectful.

Nonetheless, there are certain instances where this kind of 'slang' language should be used, for example, when one is with people who speak in a certain way, one should adapt the style and use of one's language to fit in with these people, without exaggerating the matter, e.g. when

in Rome, do as the Romans do. However, if there exists a large age gap between both parties, it is not advisable to use 'slang'. This is due to the fact that these expressions are unique to each generation of people.

### **3. PERSONAL EXPERIENCE**

By far the most productive way of learning about any culture is by living with the people that live that culture. By living with these people you are exposed to every single aspect of their culture, i.e. social, political, traditional, emotional and historical. It is normal for somebody to go to another country and compare their culture with that of the other country. However, one must be ready to absorb and adapt oneself to many different customs that maybe one does not agree with but are part of their culture and therefore are valid. One thing one must not do is try to put one above the other, e.g. say that one culture is better than the other. One cannot do this, as every culture is valid and thus of equal importance and therefore just different.

When travelling to another country the greatest difficulty a person would say is the language barrier; however, this is not the root of the problem if something of the language is known to the traveller. Of course, if the traveller goes to a country without any previous knowledge of the language then it will be an obstacle, but nonetheless there is another problem that will prevent him/her from progressing in communication with the local people. This obstacle is the question of 'in my country, we don't do it like that; we do it like this'. What this means is what was referred to above when discussing the comparison of cultures. Many people even though they have the opportunity of taking advantage of one of the richest experiences available

to them, refuse to absorb and adapt to different ways of life. Therefore, this experience has been wasted, e.g. a language student could travel to a different country and improve his/her language capability enormously, but he/she could have failed to understand why these people said or did certain things. Thus, this has been only a very shallow or superficial experience.

### **4. TEACHING TECHNIQUES**

These three aspects described so far have different moments in which they could be taught in the classroom. Literature is obviously the easiest message to convey to the students, as the material one would use speaks for itself. However, as was mentioned before it is imperative that the source, year and author be known to the students so that they can make an intelligent decision as to its worth as a document. The documents can be read and a written or oral questionnaires can be implemented to evaluate their understanding of the cultural connotations of the article, depending on its focus, i.e. historical, social, political or religious.

The language aspect is very varied regarding the techniques that could be used to convey this ability. The teacher of the class could use written, oral or listening exercises in the cultural language context to develop the students' skill in determining what kind of social situation the piece comes from. Evaluation would be carried out in the same way as the previous aspect.

The third and final aspect is probably the most difficult to carry out in the classroom, as in many cases the class is not a completely foreign environment. This can be solved with the use of a native speaker to aid the teacher in the class in a kind of workshop, where the students are able to ask and be asked about cultural topics and

therefore have a more detailed and personal explanation of the aspects that they could one day expect if they travel to the country or countries in question.

### 5. POPULAR MISCONCEPTIONS

This section will be dedicated to the analysis of certain myths concerning cultural aspects in England. But first it is important to clarify some facts.

Probably the most famous cultural aspect of the English is the Royal family. The Royal family is a tradition in the United Kingdom and the Commonwealth. They are figure heads for the state, however they have no political influence, i.e. they are not allowed to vote nor are they permitted to become involved in political affairs of the country. The politics of the country are determined by the government.

The government is comprised of the Prime Minister and his cabinet. In order for a law to be passed, first the House of Commons has to debate the issue, reach a majority and then vote. It then goes to the House of Lords where it is debated and ratified or rejected. The members of the House of Commons are elected by the people and the House of Lords is made up of wealthy landowners who have inherited the title of Lord.

Moving back to the Royal family, support for them has declined steadily over the years and has reached a point where the majority of the British people are not in favour of them. In a British newspaper in 1999 people in favour of them had fallen to 47% and against them had risen to 51% with 2% neither in favour nor against. (See table 1.) Of the 47% in favour of the Royal family 80% where aged 65 and over, so therefore with the passing of time support

for the Royal family will literally die out.<sup>1</sup> (See Table 2.)

The general interest for the British Royal family around the world comes from the media attention that they receive; however, countries that do not have a Royal family tend generally to show more interest in them than the English themselves.

TABLE 1

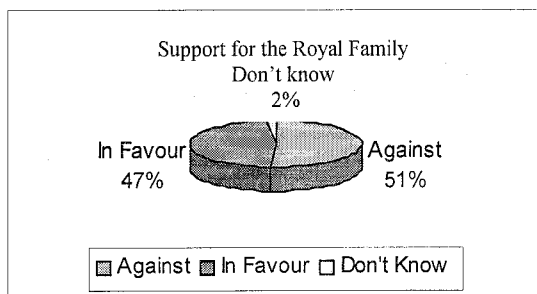
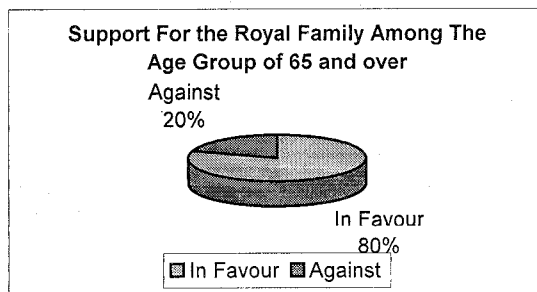


TABLE 2



The question of religion in England has always been pertinent especially for a catholic country. In England the official religion is Anglicanism, which forms the Church of England. This religion came about after Henry VIII in the 15<sup>th</sup> Century changed the religious direction of England from Catholicism to Protestantism, this was then changed back to Catholicism by his daughter Queen Mary. However, these changes implied many retaliations from the

<sup>1</sup> The Guardian, 'Support for the Royal Family will die out.' August, 1999.

state toward people of the religion which was out of favour at the time. These retaliations had a damaging effect on the general condition of the state, so when Queen Elizabeth came to power in the 16<sup>th</sup> Century she inherited a divided state and therefore tried to join the two religions and form one religion for England, Anglicanism. This religion incorporates aspects from the two religions and for this reason it is very similar to Catholicism and Protestantism. But statistically in England there is a higher percentage of Catholics than Anglicans.

The British sense of humour has always been in question with such famous individuals as Benny Hill and Mr. Bean. As a whole the British are very sarcastic when it comes to humour and therefore the typical humour; is probably the opposite of what these two television programmes represent. Of course, there are sections of the population who like this kind of humour, however it is a minority.

This brings us to the question of emotional relationships among British people. The general world consensus is that the British as a race of people are very cold and reserved, people who do not show their emotions even in situations of crisis. This was true in previous generations, but has changed over time.

Before the liberation of the sixties and seventies the people were cold and calculating even with their own families. This led to a build up of emotions that were very difficult to control. This was the cause of many relationship problems, divorces and domestic difficulties, basically all coming about from the lack of communication that came from the lack of emotional openness.

However, this has now changed on the whole with more liberation of emotions now available. The people are not so afraid to express themselves emotionally. Nonetheless, with strangers, the lack of communication is still apparent. For example, here in Colombia the people are extremely friendly by nature. They will help a stranger that needs help or they will invite him out and generally try to befriend that person. This is not the case in England and to some extent in the United States. I say 'to some extent' because there are so many immigrants in the United States that their culture has been affected more, and people have learned to adapt a little more, not entirely, to foreigners. However, in England, this phenomenon hasn't occurred to such an extent, and therefore, the people are still wary of foreigners trying to befriend them or join their group of friends. But when integrated into a group of English people a foreigner is treated with the same warmth as any other member.

One of the most important aspects for any traveller when visiting a foreign country is the question of food. What will the food be like? This is probably no more apparent than in the case of England, as we have been tainted with the brush of bad cooks, above all by the French. It is true to a certain extent that the food in England is bland, that it lacks a certain 'Je ne sais quoi' and that we don't have 'savoir-faire' as the French would say. However, the food in England is nourishing, and it is not all hamburgers and pizzas but roasted meats with roasted vegetables and sauces.

This is the typical food of England but because of the ever increasing amount of immigrants that go there, there is a huge influence of culinary delights from all over the world. There are even Colombian

restaurants in South London where one can go and enjoy a sancocho and see the lottery results from Cali. However, for a Colombian tourist in London, this would defeat the whole point of going there, as one would not be experiencing the English culture.

Social life is very important in England as the 'Pubs' form an integral part of it. 'Pubs' are like bars in a very general sense. They are places where people go to talk with local people and have a drink, normally a pint of beer. The misconception is that people go there to get drunk; it is possible of course, but most go nearly every night and may have one beer; or not have any. The idea of these places is not so much the fact that one can drink beer it is the fact that it is a place where somebody can go and relax and talk with his or her friends.

The weather is a topic which is often misunderstood by people who have seen films or television programmes about London. These films depict London as a place shrouded in mist and fog. This does occur because the Thames, a river, runs through it. Nonetheless, the weather in England is governed by Mother Nature and the four seasons. Winter from November to February is on the whole cold, with strong winds, possible snow but definitely rain. Spring, which begins in March and finishes in May, is generally warmer with rain. Summer, which runs from June to August, is hot with very little rain. Finally Autumn, from September to October, is the transition from hot to cold. These seasons or the weather that they imply is very changeable, and therefore one cannot say that it will always be hot or cold at any specific time.

Conclusions therefore that can be drawn from this document are that in order for

students to have a full understanding of the English language, they must study the environment in which the language is used, because without this understanding they will only have a superficial view of how the language works.

### References

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