American Teachers in Anti-American Environments: How to Incorporate "Culture" in the EFL Classroom

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Abstract: This paper explores the facets and the importance of culture as a necessary context for language competency, acknowledges the relevance of an antipathy towards Americanization, and investigates the characteristics of successful pedagogy for American teachers in a global setting of turbulent geopolitical circumstances influencing the EFL environment.

By 2015 about half of the world's population will be speaking or learning English language ("Christmas", 2001). Now, unlike any other time in history, one language is approaching universality (Canagarajah, 1993, 1999; "Christmas," 2001; Hecker, 2000; Marginson, 2006; Smith, 2000; Watson, 2007). Countless researchers are in agreement that English creates a global advantage in an era where only one language dominates the fields of economics, politics, science, technology, and higher education (Hecker, 2000; Marginson, 2006). English, the "globalizing force in academia" (Handsfield, 2002, p. 556) has become the international language of instruction in higher education as well as dominating conferences, journals, websites, and databases ("Christmas," 2001; Smith, 2000; Watson, 2007). However, many feel that today's unidirectional globalization is "leading to greater educational and language uniformity rather than diversity" (Watson, 2007, p. 252). This "global standard" (Marginson, 2006, p. 35) and one-way influence exported from America should yield a more accurate definition of globalization: Americanization (Smith, 2000; Watson, 2007).

Teachers of English as a foreign language (EFL) are comforted to hear that two billion people will start to learn English within the next decade (Watson, 2007). However, with today's fluctuating attitudes towards globalization and Americanization, a pedagogy of cross-cultural sensitivity is essential to incorporate the teaching of culture in the EFL curriculum. The EFL teacher needs to juggle interdependent and interactive factors such as addressing the importance of culture as a necessary context for language competency while acknowledging the interplay between the home culture and the target language culture as well as exploring the antipathy towards Americanization. This paper will investigate the relation between American-style EFL education and the anti-American influence and investigate the characteristics of successful pedagogy for American teachers of English in a global setting.

EFL Pedagogy of American Teachers

EFL students all over the world are exposing themselves to not only a new language but a new culture and a new version of practical American pedagogy (Fowler, 2005; Smith, 2000). An example of the export of English language and American culture includes the huge increase in the expanding business of education. Many countries are importing American teachers (Hecker, 2000; Richardson, 2004; Smith, 2000) and in addition to several established "American" Universities in Paris, London, Cairo, and Beirut, new satellite campuses are expanding in China, South Africa, and on the Persian Gulf (Marginson, 2006; Smith, 2000). The "magnetic attraction of American higher education" (Marginson, 2006, p.18) and the American-style pedagogy that has become more and more available globally is quite different from the traditional, classical version of higher education that focused on philosophy and theory-laden approaches (Smith,

2000). The Americanized version of education pragmatically emphasizes technical know-how for careers, such as engineering, science, and business, and exudes a sense of real-world preparation (Smith, 2000). In a study done in the United Arab Emirates, Richardson (2004) provides examples of the "western notions of knowledge and educational practices" (p. 430) that were brought by the Anglophone developers of a new collegiate program. More specifically, in EFL classrooms, the new and different collaborative teaching styles focusing on the learner often contrast with local pedagogy. Many examples from Sri Lanka, (Canagarajah, 1993), Morocco (Hecker, 2000), United Arab Emirates (Clarke & Otaky, 2006; Richardson, 2004), and Japan, Laos, and Vietnam (Fowler, 2005) demonstrate the prevalence of traditional methods that include lectures, rote learning, and drill exercises that students were familiar with prior to the arrival of American EFL instructors. The American methods may be "difficult, even frightening pedagogy" and these cultural differences may be "formidable obstacles" (Fowler, 2005, p. 156) for EFL instructors.

Importance of "Culture" in EFL

In response to the increasing global dominance of the English language and the inseparable relation that language and culture hold (Atkinson, 1999; Durocher, 2007; Siskin, 2007), American EFL instructors today are faced with additional challenges. Teachers must not only acknowledge but address the intricate ramifications of teaching culture - notably, American culture - in the EFL classroom in a world that has become more anti-American. As the English language spreads, so spreads the conjoined partner, culture, and more specifically, a controversial American culture (Canagarajah, 1999; Fowler, 2005; Handsfield, 2002; Smith, 2000). Culture is one of the "most complex words in the English language" to define (Clarke, 2006, p. 112). The scope of addressing culture issues is limitless; however, EFL educators have to at least concentrate on the dual components of culture: the culture of the target language (L2), in this case, English, and American culture, and the local home culture of the student. They also need to recognize that culture is not a stable "capsule" (Ingold, 1994, as cited in Atkinson, 1999, p. 632) of specific elements but rather a nebulous concept of fluctuating variables (Atkinson, 1999; Canagarajah, 1999; Knutson, 2006). Culture is "a never-finished site of competing historical and social discourses" (Clarke, 2006, p. 120) and an "evolution" (Siskin, 2007, p. 36). Deciphering cultural variables helps understanding the many dichotomies influenced by Anti-American sentiment and enables the teacher to intervene and overcome these variables so that the sentiment does not inhibit or interfere with the language acquisition.

A successful EFL teacher is cognizant that teaching/learning the culture of the L2 language is an integral component in language learning (Durocher, 2007; Hecker, 2000; Johnson, 2005; Knutson, 2006; Schulz, 2007). "Knowledge of a language - including, centrally, how to use it - cannot be developed without at the same time developing knowledge of the socio-cultural contexts in which that language occurs" (Atkinson, 1999, p. 647). Furthermore, because knowledge or understanding of the target culture is not automatically learned by language study, it needs to be consciously introduced by the teacher (Knutson, 2006). "Speech events have their own culture-specific structures and routines" (Schulz, 2007, p. 9). This cultural knowledge of the target language is essential to understand the nuances of speech acts, such as requesting and apologizing, as evidenced in similar research by Cohen and Shively (2007) who claim, "Language and culture are inextricably intertwined in pragmatic behavior" (p. 193). The relation between culture and understanding a language is so inarguably fundamental that the Defense Language Institute Foreign Language Center contracted the development of a language and cultural familiarization course to help soldiers who would be interacting with Iraqis (Sims,

2007). This program of simulated interactive digital characters emphasizes the cultural elements of "gestures that may be misinterpreted…[and] proper and improper ways to interact with Iraqi women," and other communication lessons on cultural norms (Sims, 2007, p. 88). In other words, the American EFL teacher needs to be aware that it is the cultural understanding of communication that gives speech acts functional value and this cultural understanding needs to be incorporated into the EFL class. Likewise, the EFL teacher needs to be aware that positive or negative attitudes and preconceptions of students towards various target languages influence the success or failure of the students' language acquisition (Durocher, 2007; Fukunaga, 2006; Husseinali, 2006; Johnson, 2005; Siskin, 2007; Watson, 2007). For example, in Puerto Rico, the struggle with historical ties to the English language and cultural identity affects students' English language acquisition. Puerto Rican nationalism has been cited as the major reason for resistance to English learning and unsuccessful bilingualization (Clachar, 1998). In a study of American anime (Japanese animation) fans that studied Japanese, the positive link between the exposure to Japanese culture through watching anime films and reading anime books created a successful, intrinsically motivated learner (Fukunaga, 2006). As an example of positive attitudes towards English acquisition, Canagarajah's study (1993) introduced a student expressing, "English is…to converse with the world at large - and not just the world of technology and machines, but also of dreams, aspirations and ideals" (p. 604). Other students in the study had similar positive ideas about English such as "progress", "civilization", and "culture and social respect", which reveals possible motivations to learn English (p. 612).

Exploring Antipathy towards Americanization

In a post- September 11th era, many negative associations with English stem from anti-American sentiment. Recently, many expressions of American language and culture tend towards "imperialistic, expansionist, out of control threat to world order" (Meunier, 2005, p. 128), "uninformed and misinformed about the world" (McGray, 2006, p. 42), "colonization, power, and domination" (Skutnabb-Kangas, as cited in Handsfield, 2002, p. 544), "displacement of other languages" (Marginson, 2006, p. 25), and "hegemonic" (Johnson, 2005, p. 1). The existence of these anti-American notions amplifies the importance of acknowledging the inevitable influence of the learner's environment. The unfavorable views of the United States (Meunier, 2005) directly affect the EFL classroom, teacher, and pedagogy. Much of the animosity is due to the perceived imperialistic attitudes of an unchallenged American hyperpower (Meunier, 2005) and the feeling that the spread of American ideas and customs was bad for Muslim countries (Nisbet, Nisbet, Scheufele, & Shanahan, 2004). Therefore, the very idea of expanding the English language and culture is at the crux of this negative attitude. The dichotomous acceptance of the importance of English and the reluctance to neglect or ignore the indigenous language and culture is felt by many (Atkinson, 1999; Canagarajah, 1999; "Christmas," 2001; Clarke, 2006; Handsfield, 2002; Watson, 2006). When Americans teach English, and invariably, American culture, it is essential to examine the issue of anti-American sentiment.

According to Smith (2000), Americanization proliferates through the use of "U.S. teachers and teaching methods and material [that] probably do advance American political culture, norms, and even policy at the expense of local ways" (p. 71). With the evidence of EFL teachers traversing boarders and encountering negative sentiments that develop in response to the rise of a singular power, issues of cultural sensitivity have recently been researched (Canagarajah, 1999; Dolby, 2004; Fowler, 2005; Handsfield, 2002; Johnson, 2005; Knutson, 2006; Marginson, 2006; Smith, 2000; Sowden, 2007; Watson, 2007). This "linguistic

imperialism" should be considered for the purpose of avoiding "hegemonic" or ethnocentric pedagogies ("Christmas," 2001; Durocher, 2007; Handsfield, 2002; Johnson, 2007; Smith, 2000; Watson, 2006). While Canagarajah (1999) argues that too much emphasis is given to the idea of linguistic imperialism, he concedes that even though English will remain a global language, it is still important to recognize and protect endangered languages and acknowledge the culture of minority communities. The exploration of attitudes of antipathy towards Americanization is necessary to understand how we can create a better pedagogy in the EFL classroom. The EFL teacher can promote the benefits of English as a lingua franca while still respecting the "fundamental linguistic human right" of the mother tongue (Watson, 2007, p. 252). With the understanding of the various factors that inhibit a positive and motivating learning environment, the cognizant EFL teacher can promote cross-cultural sensitivity to bridge the cultural gap.

Successful Pedagogy for American Teachers of EFL

According to Durocher (2007) the classroom is the logical arena to teach sensitivity to cultural differences. The challenge for the American EFL teacher in the role of cultural ambassador in an area with anti-American sentiment is to be cognizant of how cultural differences affect the classroom (Fowler, 2005) while still allowing for unexpected opportunities to reveal themselves and provide fodder for cultural comparisons (Hecker, 2000; Johnson, 2005).

EFL teachers should look at the home culture of the learner to recognize the "socio-political forces outside the walls of the classroom" (Canagarajah, 1993, p. 605). For example, despite the agreement that anti-American sentiment is pervasive in Muslim countries (Nisbet et al., 2004), more new Muslims are studying English rather than Arabic (Watson, 2007). To minimize anti-American sentiment, it is important to respect the local culture and realize the influence of the American teacher and the potential of interacting with certain EFL students who tend to benefit from American teachers of EFL (Richardson, 2004). In many parts of the world, the students who benefit from the EFL programs are from wealthy families who invest in high value education in order to maintain their status (Marginson, 2006). Hecker (2000) describes his students as "future managers and wealthy heirs to Moroccan government and industry" (p. 118). In other words, influential people are being influenced by Americans and American culture. This abundance of these students creates an even greater responsibility to address the conscious or unconscious soft power, or influence, that teachers and academic institutions as purveyors of cultural norms unavoidably possess (Atkinson, 1999; Johnson, 2005; Smith, 2000; Watson, 2007).

The EFL teacher should acknowledge that teachers and schools as "agents of change" represent "critical" and "transformative" roles in the classroom (Handsfield, 2000, p. 552). Dolby (2004) expresses that in a global context, national identity shifts from passive to active. This creates a new role for the teacher as a representative or cultural ambassador of the United States. Knutson (2006) proposes that teachers should reveal their personal histories and cross-cultural experiences as examples of cultural understanding and demonstrate the subjectivity of culture. Ethical questions have been raised about the cultural and contextual appropriateness of both subject matter and teacher roles presenting the culture that students need and seek (Clarke, 2006; Hecker, 2000; Johnson, 2005; Richardson, 2004). However, this obstacle can be eliminated or diminished if American teachers understand how to relate to the student as both an individual and as a product of culture. Atkinson (1999) highlights this issue and recognizes that a culture is made up of individuals just as an individual's context is his or her culture. The teacher should accept that the goal of teaching (American) culture is to promote an understanding of the culture and to make connections when possible. Knutson (2006) reveals the possibility of

perpetuating negative stereotypes if the student feels pushed to accept or adopt the new cultural ideas. When the instruction of the target culture minimizes the polarizing "us" and "them" viewpoint and is instead taught in relation to the home culture, then the students can gain a better understanding of culture as an evolving crossroads of ideas, values, and traditions and not as a threat to their identity or traditions (Durocher, 2007; Hecker, 2000; Knutson, 2006; Siskin, 2007; Sowden, 2007).

The EFL teacher should introduce and accommodate multiple viewpoints and reflections that reveal an understanding of cultural comparisons that allow flexibility and change. One way to accomplish this is through the use of ongoing inquiry-based projects or portfolios that address cultural comparisons and critical reflection over time (McGinnis, 2007; Schultz, 2007). In traditional hierarchic classroom environments, the teacher is usually looked at as the authority and sole source of information. It is up to the teacher to elicit different ideas and opinions (Fowler, 2005; Hecker, 2000). Fowler (2005) reveals the merits of active learning in EFL, such as role-playing, as an approach to overcome the hierarchic classrooms and even suggests that it might be necessary to plant a student in the class who is prepared to ask questions and open the door to a less lecture-like, teacher-driven discussion. Of course, to know how to best adapt the EFL pedagogy, the EFL teachers need to develop a familiarity with the culture that they are teaching in and accept the role of learner as well as teacher. In the expatriate teaching situation, Sowden (2007) advises, "Instead of trying to impose cultures of their own, they must work with the cultures that they encounter" (p. 305). Taking steps to learn the language, customs, values, and pedagogy of the local culture will help the American teacher immensely in ameliorating the negative stereotypes that they may encounter while teaching in the EFL classroom.

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