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A Broader View of Culture in TESOL: A Response to Frazier's "The Trouble With Cultural Oversensitivity"

In the most recent edition of *The CATESOL Journal* (Vol. 14.1, 2002), Stefan Frazier questions the inclusion of cross-cultural training in ESL/EFL teacher education as creating oversensitivity to cross-cultural differences. Frazier suggests that the entire *CATESOL Journal* theme issue (Vol. 12.1, 2000), as well as many scholars in the field, subscribe to this oversensitivity to cultural difference, and he points in particular to my own article (Buckley, 2000) as an example of this "oversensitivity." He further worries that the attention to cross-cultural issues represents essentialism, the rigid characterization of whole groups of people in terms of a finite set of variables, and he suggests the alternative approach of focusing on students as individuals.

I think Frazier's principal objection to this volume, and in particular to my approach, can best be answered by restating the purpose and intended audience of my article. Most MA TESOL programs, both in California and throughout the United States, do not require any course work in culture or intercultural communications (Nelson, 1998). Thus, it is quite possible and common for graduate students to develop considerable expertise in the linguistics and pedagogy of ESL/EFL without any serious study of how culture impinges on their pedagogy and their professional practice. Unless one believes that culture is irrelevant in teaching English to speakers of other languages, the current situation represents a serious gap in ESL teacher education. Paradoxically, there is an expansive literature on language teaching and culture, but for some reason this research has not led to its inclusion in required MA curricula. However, the problem extends beyond graduate programs. Large numbers of practicing ESL/EFL teachers have had no training or background in this area, yet they are faced with a variety of cultural issues in their work every day. One of the articles in the theme issue (Smith, 2000), in fact, originated out of a plea from community college teachers in the area where the author works to provide some guidance for working with a sudden influx of Ukrainian ESL students. In my faculty experience, it is common to receive this sort of appeal. Simply stated, there is a great need to provide knowledge of cultural and intercultural issues to ESL teachers.

Such training can and ought to take a variety of forms. One value in a cultural-orientations approach is that it provides a starting point for teachers to begin to make sense of behavioral variations in terms of cultural norms and values. Moreover, the framework that I use can be applied to cultures, subcultures, and individuals. It is more a tool for generating questions than for providing answers, and any experienced intercultural trainer emphasizes this point.

In my experience with in-service training, I have often worked with groups of teachers who have been inundated with a newly arrived cultural group whom they find difficult to understand and deal with. In this situation, it is common for teachers with no intercultural training to form stereotypes of the entire ethnic community based on their difficulties with a relatively small number of people. This, in fact, was the case in Sacramento a few years ago when I gave a training session to teachers who had just received large numbers of Ukrainian and Russian students. I began the session by asking volunteers to share some of their difficult experiences. The first volunteer stood up and in an extremely emotional and vociferous manner said, "These Russians are racists, and I don't know how to handle this in my classroom." Most of the session had been designed to talk specifically about this cultural group, and this teacher and the entire group were given some time to talk openly about the problems that they were experiencing. In addition to expressing their frustrations, the teachers were guided to look more carefully at the group, exploring the past history of the group, their immigrant history in the US, their exposure to multicultural settings, their own expressed feelings about their cultural identity, and the interactional expectations of the classroom. Through this process, the teachers began to see the possible reasons for the students' frustration. We then began a discussion of how classroom changes might mitigate some of the problems that both the teachers and the students were experiencing. Lasting change in these types of situations, however, involves cognitive development that usually occurs in stages. It is not uncommon for teachers who are new to the field of intercultural communications to move from stereotyping to a period of essentializing. This is similar to the period of overgeneralizing seen in many disciplines as a part of the learning process, such as the high school junior who gets stuck in the five-paragraph essay stage or the child who overgeneralizes during language acquisition. With proper guidance, however, teachers can emerge from this stage with a much higher level of sophistication in understanding the uses and caveats with regard to culture-specific information. This understanding can guide them in the choices they make for their curriculum and for their classroom practice.

In his critique, Frazier actually conflates the two principal dangers in promoting an orientations framework: 1) that the use of such a framework might lead to false or inappropriate conclusions; and 2) that an orientations framework represents an essentialist perspective that is reductionist and not theoretically robust. I fully agree with the first concern and state repeatedly in my article that teachers and students need to be cautioned against such overgeneralizing and stereotyping. One of the principles that any competent

interculturalist emphasizes is the importance of "staying open," of using everything one knows from reading and from experience to understand a particular situation before trying to draw conclusions. In many respects, teaching is a dialectic between the teacher and the students. Knowing that recipe approaches are not useful, we must connect with the students and their experiences and needs if we are to help them.

Moreover, I frankly have not witnessed the imminent danger that Frazier perceives. Whenever I have used the framework in teaching and training, the issue of stereotyping always comes up immediately, even among those with little or no experience. While extremely frustrated teachers may begin with strong stereotypes, they are quickly willing to give them up in the face of information regarding differing cultural logic. For example, once my in-service teachers understood that their Ukrainian and Russian students had never interacted with cultural groups other than their own and that their racial attitudes came largely from TV and movies, the teachers could move from their own frustration to problem-solving.

Thankfully, the U.S. educational system seems to have succeeded in inculcating the belief that stereotyping is dangerous and dehumanizing. I can't imagine that any community college teacher living in a multicultural community such as San Francisco might conclude that a Korean national student who attended high school in the States would exhibit Korean rhetorical patterns in writing, as Frazier suggests. Likewise, in the face of the multicultural variety that ESL teachers experience, it is hard to imagine that any teacher today might conclude that all people who "look" Korean will manifest traditional Korean communication behaviors. Furthermore, I suspect that teachers with a background in the basic principles of intercultural communications would be far less likely to draw such erroneous conclusions.

While the teachers I have worked with do seem to understand stereotyping when they see it, they don't seem to have knowledge of which behavioral differences might be culturally based and the cultural logic that underpins these differences. What the framework should do is give teachers a tool for examining how behavior varies both within and across cultures, and where we might expect to find variation. Teachers also need some understanding of the idiosyncratic nature of behavioral variation. Not all differences are cultural, and teachers need some training in understanding what types of behaviors might be culturally based and what things probably do not have cultural roots.

On the second point, the theoretical robustness of essentialism has become somewhat of a straw-man argument in the recent debates on culture in TESOL. No matter which side of the issue people favor, the tension between sameness and difference is inherent in our work. There are situations in which we need to see students as individuals, and there are contexts in which it is more productive to think of them as members of a group. However, I don't know anyone in this field who would go on record as an essentialist. This criticism has become a proxy for trivializing cultural analysis at the group level; it doesn't promote critical examination of the issue or

acknowledge the clear necessity to consider group identity as an important factor in many circumstances.

Like Geertz (1973), I am not yet ready to give up the idea of culture even though I understand its limitations. An enormous amount of empirical evidence supports the notion that some cultures tend to be individualistic and value self-expression and others tend to be more collectivist, that some groups value formal logic as a means of persuasion and others value emotion, that some value equality while others place more emphasis on hierarchy as an organizing principle, and the list goes on. To deny these facts is to ignore a whole body of serious anthropological and linguistic research that informs our work. And there are contexts in which it is important to have knowledge of these cultural facts.

At the same time, it is just as short-sighted not to acknowledge that a postmodern, multicultural world complicates this effort. Underlying Frazier's critique is the valid concern that students have multifarious identities that affect how they interact and how they learn. Generation 1.5 students who may have many disparate cultural influences on their behavior are particularly complex. Yep, in his piece in the theme issue (2000) and his numerous other articles, deals impressively with individual identities such as sexuality, gender, and race, in addition to the traditional ways of understanding intercultural difference. Cummins takes up the same issue (2000), focusing on the California immigrant population and the need for bilingual and multilingual children to develop a sense of self that is embedded in an intercultural classroom community.

We need to be mindful of this complexity. However, it is really not accurate to suggest that ESL professionals should choose essentialism or individualism or that one approach is more moral than another or that this entire question is a theoretical fad that comes and goes. Postmodern scholarship, in fact, rejects this sort of binary thinking. All of these positions misapprehend the role of culture in our field. The ways in which culture intersects with TESOL vary dramatically from one context to another. While Frazier's individualistic approach may be appropriate for Generation 1.5 community college students in a composition class in the States, it would be inappropriate for English writing courses in China, Japan, and many other societies (Carson 1992; Coleman, 1994). I agree with Atkinson (1999) that an ecumenical acceptance of a variety of perspectives on culture is preferable. However, I don't think that those choices should be based on personal preference or ideology. Once culture becomes an ideological tool, then our teaching merely becomes a vehicle for covertly promoting our own values and beliefs. Instead, the role that culture plays in teaching considerations ought to derive from the teaching context, and there are many of them.

Culture and intercultural communications has, in fact, become a very large subdiscipline within the field of TESOL, and the research on culture and classroom practice has taken a variety of paths. It is unfortunate that the most recent discussions concerning culture in TESOL (Atkinson, 1999; Kubota, 1999; Spack, 1997; and Zamel, 1997) have focused almost exclusively

on the classroom level and on composition in particular. This is not surprising since the scholarly consideration of culture in TESOL began in the area of writing (Connor, 1996; Connor & Kaplan, 1987; Purves, 1988) and developed into the very interesting subdiscipline of contrastive rhetoric. This context of TESOL lends itself to the false dichotomy of essentialism versus individualism since the early work suggested culturally defined group differences in writing, and the more recent approaches in the US follow an individualistic approach of "finding one's voice." As a result of this debate, the whole issue of culture in TESOL seems to have been reduced to a very small issue within a much larger discipline. More specifically, the recent culture debates were articulated in a manner that implied that writing was either the only or the primary place where culture and language intersect in the applied arena of our field, and this is simply not the case.

Issues of culture in classroom practice have also included foundational work on intercultural issues (Bennett, 1993; Buckley, 1999a, 1999b; Diaz-Rico & Weed, 1995; Fantini 1997; Hofstede, 1986; and Kramsch, 1993), which have examined, for example, the causes of classroom conflict, classroom culture, cultural differences in learning, culture shock, anomie, generational issues for L2 families, and basic exercises for students in understanding cultural difference, to mention a few. Scholarship on classroom practice has also included the area of appropriate pedagogy, which questions whether or not Western ways of teaching are valid in non-Western contexts (Coleman, 1997; Delens, 1999; Holliday, 1994; Regan, 2000; Savignon, 2002) and how pedagogy and curricula can be adapted to fit appropriately with other teaching contexts. However, to practice appropriate pedagogy, a teacher must have a deep understanding of the culture in which she is working and the cultural influences from her own culture that may become embedded in the curriculum and program design. This understanding assumes culture-specific knowledge.

Outside the classroom are other lines of scholarship that emanate out of cultural considerations. While these areas don't have a direct or immediate impact on classroom practice, they compel us to look at cultural issues that help shape the way we conceptualize education and language learning and, in the long term, this affects practice. Phillipson (1992), for example, looks at the ways in which ELT and even specific teaching methodologies have been used to perpetuate inequality and exploitation. In addition, Tollefson (1995) with his edited volume takes a more classroom-based approach, examining the ways in which language policy and language education are linked to the distribution of political power and economic resources. The extensive scholarship on literacy development has examined similar issues (Street, 1995). In recent years, the focus of this research has changed from an emphasis on acquisition problems and remediation to an examination of literacy as social practice in a cross-cultural perspective. In this work, literacy has been reconceptualized, no longer seen as a culturally neutral skill, but rather as a kind of powerful ideological practice that can exert covert consequences. All of this work raised issues that led to the development of appropriate pedagogy and has helped us to theorize that area more rigorously.

The concern for social factors in language acquisition (and this includes elements of culture) is also represented in the work on acculturation (Schumann, 1978), accommodation (Giles 1984), and social identity (Peirce, 1995). Each of these areas has examined how language learners position themselves within a new language culture, and how that affects acquisition. The examples mentioned are only some of the many areas of inquiry that have contributed to the literature that examines the intersection of culture, language teaching, and language acquisition. This work does not represent an "oversensitivity" to culture. It demonstrates the proper place that culture occupies in this field.

Finally, and perhaps most important for teachers and scholars, we need to be self-reflective of the influence that culture may have on our own preferences and choices. A classroom that focuses on helping students "find their own individual 'voices' " (Frazier, 2002, p. 288) is an approach that makes sense to someone who comes from a place where individualism has primacy. However, someone who defines his identity in terms of group membership would have difficulty in even understanding the point of this approach. This type of approach would not be appropriate in most EFL contexts and while it would be appropriate in an ESL setting, the students would likely need some scaffolding to understand the intent. Pedagogical decisions can't always be made at the level of the individual student, and they shouldn't always reflect personal preference or ideology. They must be made on the basis of context, and understanding context is crucially dependent on a teacher's knowledge of both language and culture.

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