

THE INCLUSION OF CULTURE IN TESOL LESSONS: THREE CASE STUDIES ON TEACHER COGNITIONS AND CONTEXT

David Knott

University of Exeter, Exeter, United Kingdom

The Higher Colleges of Technology, Ras Al Khaimah, United Arab Emirates

ABSTRACT: *This study explores the use of culture in TESOL lessons by investigating the cognitions of three teachers working in very different contexts: the United States, Central/Eastern Europe, and Saudi Arabia. Through a series of semi-structured interviews, the practices of the participants were examined to better understand the types of lessons in which they choose to include topics related to their own or their students' cultures, their motivations for doing so, and any contextual factors which may influence their decisions. The results indicate that the teachers regularly include cultural topics in a variety of lesson types, but most often in speaking or reading activities. The participants are largely motivated to include such topics in order to engage their students, yet context can prove a limiting factor. Implications extend to teachers and teacher trainers, particularly in light of the teachers' approaches to the intersection of cultures in their classrooms as a means to develop students' language skills and their abilities to interact with the diverse population of English speakers.*

KEYWORDS: TESOL, Culture, Interculturality, teacher cognition, context

INTRODUCTION

Language is one of the defining elements of culture; it is generally viewed as impossible to wholly separate the teaching of one without the other. Kramsch (1998) states that “through all its verbal and non-verbal aspects, *language embodies cultural reality* (p. 3) (emphasis in original). Such a statement seems to leave little room for the teaching of a ‘Global English’, or an English language that is strictly utilitarian and devoid of cultural inflections, especially when the language teachers are foreign to the learners (Loveday, 1981, p. 123, as cited in Corbett, 2003, p. 23). Despite this, the task of including culture in English language teaching is extremely difficult because of the amorphous nature of the concept (Atkinson, 1999, p. 647). What actually is culture, and whose is it? What can (or should) be included as culture? These questions underline more than a pedagogical challenge; there are associated risks connected to “a harmful homogenization” leading to stereotypes (Kumaravadivelu, 2003, p.710) on one extreme, and neo-colonialism and cultural imperialism on another (Phillipson, 2016). Thus, how teachers decide to include their interpretation of culture in their lessons is a topic worthy of investigation.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND AND LITERATURE REVIEW

The research focuses on the use of culture in TESOL lessons, so it is important to clarify the term culture and to specify the interactions when teaching particular elements of those cultures. Since it investigates the choices teachers make regarding culture as a topic, teacher cognition and context must also be elucidated.

Culture in Tesol Lessons

Essentialism is a common term for the view of culture as the essential, representative aspect of separate groups, distinct through either national or ethnic differences (Holliday, 1999). The concept of large, monolithic cultures gave rise to theories such as the Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis regarding the interactional nature of culture and language, that one's language determines how they see the world; one culture's different language will dictate how they construct reality (Whorf, 1956, as cited in Halliday, 1999, p.5). This prescribed reality has the potential to remove a level of members' individuality and reduce individuals to stereotypes (Holliday, 2011).

This essentialist interpretation of culture can be contrasted with the concept of *small cultures*, which are not imposed, static, or necessarily connected with nations or ethnicity: "small culture is thus a dynamic, ongoing group process which operates in changing circumstances to enable group members to make sense of and operate meaningfully within those circumstances" (Holliday, 1999, p.248). This notion of small cultures, called *non-essentialist*, is not necessarily a judgment on size, but on the connections and similarities that bring certain groups together, with groups interacting and overlapping in a myriad of ways. Therefore, small cultures are concerned with activities and the process of making meaning rather than identity. Goodenough (1994) states:

There is a different culture of the activity for each set of role performers. (...) The cultural makeup of a society is thus to be seen not as a monolithic entity determining the behaviour of its members, but a *mélange* of understandings and expectations regarding a variety of activities that serve as guides to their conduct and interpretation. (pp.266-267, as quoted in Holliday, 1999, p.250)

In light of large and small cultures, language learning and its connections to culture take on different dimensions. On the basic level, learning a language means learning aspects of the associated culture one would be expected to abide by when interacting with a native speaker of that language: greetings, conversational norms, manner of referring to others, slang words and their intensity, to name a few (Wierzbicka, 1991). The inseparability of language and culture may remain true for language learning where languages and populations are for the most part isolated; however, it is growing more and more difficult with the intermingling and diversity of groups of people around the world (Canagarajah, 2005).

A more appropriate view of culture in interactions is the notion of *languacultures*, cultural meanings created by the speaker in each interaction. The theory of languaculture was popularized by Agar, who describes confusing encounters between native speakers of different languages as “rich points.” According to Agar (2006), differences that come to fore in such interactions require a form of translation, an action which shows the relational nature of cultures (p.5). Those interactions were similarly termed “contact zones” by Pratt (1991), with cultures thus interacting through individuals, termed *individual-cultural* or *individuals-in-context* by Atkinson (1999, p.648). For TESOL, then, most important is the interaction between these individuals from different languacultures, like a translation: “Culture isn’t a property of *them*, nor is it a property of *us*. It is an artificial construction built to enable translation *between* them and us (...). There is no culture of X, only a culture of X for Y” (Agar, 2006, p.6) (emphasis in original).

This is not to say that culture does not exist or that there are no differences between groups of people, only that the interpretations of culture are many, and that individuals do not strictly belong to only one culture or another. According to Strauss & Quinn (1997), “Each person (is) a junction point for an infinite number of partially overlapping cultures” (p.7). Therefore, it is nearly impossible to teach a strict definition of culture or inviolate rules of behavior when teaching English to speakers of other languages, leading instead to helping students develop sensitivities and abilities to “navigate between various cultures” (Kramsch, 2014, p.249). This sort of teaching enables students and teachers to exchange ideas and cultures in cross-cultural classroom environments, and to look at their own cultures as they may be seen by others in a *zone of interculturality* (Kramsch, 2009; McKay, 2002). This has multiple benefits because in the process of acquiring a foreign language, “students are taught critical language awareness, interpretation and translation, historical and political consciousness, social sensibility, and aesthetic perception,” according to a report by the Modern Language Association (MLA) in 2007 (as quoted by Byram & Kramsch, 2008, p.21).

TEACHER COGNITION AND CONTEXT IN TESOL LESSONS

Curriculum designers and administrators notwithstanding, within TESOL lessons, it is the teacher who predominantly decides what is included and how that material is presented. The complex manner in which those decisions are reached are personally constructed by each individual teacher and is referred to as *teacher cognition*; it is not nearly as straightforward as many had believed in the past (Borg, 2015; Cross, 2010; Johnson, 2006). An individual’s decision making, and the processes of learning it results from, lead to the view of human learning not merely as the gathering of facts and knowledge, but as a combination of social and cognitive contexts (Johnson, 2006). Hence, knowledge is built up through social interactions, what Lave and Wenger (1991) call *communities of practice*, and to understand that process of learning and ultimately human cognition, we must examine those social interactions and “see how they reappear as mental activities in the individual” (as cited by Johnson, 2006, p.237). This echoes Vygotsky’s (1997) general law of cultural development: mental functions occur twice, first on the social plane, and second

on psychological: “Social relations, real relations of people, stand behind all the higher functions and their relations” (p.106, as quoted in Lantolf & Johnson, 2007, p.883).

For teachers, the higher functions we are concerned with are the instructional decisions they make. The social interactions that precede decision making in teacher cognition are extensive: Goodman’s (1988) research indicates that beliefs developed before a teacher’s training can have more impact on teaching than the actual training (as cited by Borg, 1998, p.29). Of course, this depends on the individual, as Borg’s (1998) own study depicts a teacher who “was profoundly influenced by his initial training” (p.29). Still, teachers’ experiences in the classroom are another social interaction that may influence decision making. Perhaps they exert the most influence to “filter” teachers’ beliefs: Kinzer (1988, p.359) questions if the “social, psychological, and environmental realities of the school and classroom” did not have the power to supersede teachers’ pre-established beliefs in the realm of decision making.

Despite training programs, teachers’ decisions may be greatly affected once faced with any number of obstacles in their practice (Theriot & Tice, 2008). Those obstacles are not limited to teaching since the classroom is not isolated from the world at large. A classroom is “embedded in specific, complex and overlapping cultural, social, educational and political contexts,” what can be termed *socioeducational* contexts (Graves, 2008, p.153). Johnson (2006) cites various studies that show the power of those socioeducational contexts: L2 teachers adapt their own teaching to suit their local contexts, as historically established (p.245). However it is not only local contexts that can have an effect on teacher’s mental lives: “Context is not necessarily limited to specific geopolitical boundaries but can be sociopolitical, sociohistorical, and socioeconomic contexts that shape and are shaped by local and global events, for example, the globalization or the recognition of World Englishes” (Johnson, 2006, p.245).

Thus, how teachers make decisions is a complicated topic, one which warrants further investigation. Decision making can be construed in what teachers choose to include in lessons, and it may be instructive to examine those choices in light of individual teachers’ contexts to see how their choices may be different from those in other contexts. As English continues to proliferate around the world, how teachers address the cross-cultural nature of TESOL is of great interest, particularly as beliefs and interpretations of culture change over time, as do philosophies for teaching English and culture (Kramsch, 2014).

METHODOLOGY

Within the philosophical framework of Interpretivism, the exploratory nature of a case study is most appropriate for this research because of its concern with the “world of ideas” that each individual exists in and how they negotiate that world of ideas through communication with others (Pring, 2004, pp. 50-51). Since this project investigates teacher decision making in different contexts, looking at each case individually serves to provide a more complete accounting of those relations. When accounts are formulated, they aim for a deeper understanding and provide “rich material for the research report” in the form

of ‘thick’ descriptions (Dörnyei, 2007, pp. 39-40). Although possibly limiting, it must be stated that, according to Holliday (2007), “thick description is still possible with small studies. It is also possible with single data sources” (p. 85). As qualitative data, such thick descriptions do not reveal some objective truth, but rather the truth for the individuals involved, meaning how they make sense of their context, i.e., reality as they see it (Guba & Lincoln, 1989, p.8, as cited in Pring, 2003, p.46). The subjective reality of individual teachers is precisely the aim of this study, and the “emergent research design” and “flexible analytic categories” (Dörnyei, 2007, p.37) further suit the nature of the project.

Research Questions

The research is intimately connected with teachers’ practice. Essentially, it is asking how important teachers consider the inclusion of topics connected to their own culture, as they see it, and how important teachers consider the involvement of topics connected to the cultures of their students. More specifically, the research questions are as follows:

1. What sorts of lessons do teachers conduct that focus on or include their own cultures?
2. What sorts of lessons do teachers conduct that include or focus on the cultures of their students?
3. What are teachers’ motivations for involving different cultures?
4. How much do the approaches and experiences of teachers’ inclusion of culture depend on their context?

RESEARCH METHODS

Interviews were conducted with participants; interviews “capture rich and complex details” and provide “thick descriptions” of participants’ views and insider meanings: “Only the actual participants themselves who can reveal the meanings and interpretations of their experiences and actions” (Dörnyei, 2007, pp.37-38). Based on the research questions, semi-structured interview questions were developed, including a mix of structured and open questions (Greener, 2011), in what Patton (1980) calls the “interview guide approach”, where the questions are outlined, and the interviewer decides the order and form of the questions actually asked, keeping the encounter “conversational and situational” (p. 206, as quoted in Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2011, p. 413). Such an approach provides an emic perspective, and is flexible enough to adjust and react to participants’ responses, since “the researcher is essentially the main ‘measurement device’ in the study” (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 7, as quoted in Dörnyei, 2007, p.38).

The included interviews were conducted via an internet video communicator, primarily Skype, in a manner that was as comfortable and stress-free as possible for the participants. Prior to beginning the research, the interview format was piloted on Skype with a teacher similar to the participants (Turner, 2010), leading to a few changes in questions and an adjustment to the approach to allow for the time lag on the Internet. The final interviews, each lasting 45 to 55 minutes, were ultimately transcribed, and participants were also asked

to review the transcriptions for member checking, finally generating the qualitative data for analysis.

Research Participants

The participants are all TESOL professionals with more than five years' experience of working in higher education in different countries. Six individuals were initially interviewed, but the number was reduced to three due to the constraints of the paper, which is possible in research of this type (Creswell, 2007). They were selected to participate because they are all associates with seemingly similar educational backgrounds, yet each working in quite different environments. Participants read and signed a consent form, which made clear that participation is voluntary, that they could withdraw at any time, and that they were guaranteed confidentiality. All reasonable steps were taken to ensure their comfort and convenience, and to avoid harm throughout the research process (Richards, 2003).

Approach to Analysis

After each interview was transcribed and additional approval was granted by participants, those transcriptions were coded in a variety of approaches. The background and basic context for each participant received *attribute* coding, since this method is used to log "basic descriptive information" (Saldana, 2009, p. 55). The content of the remainder of each interview was initially coded *structurally*, as Saldana (2009, p. 66) states that this method is driven by research questions and topic to enable more detailed subsequent coding; this was done by color coding portions of interviews based on the topic under discussion. Once organized structurally, with additional reflection, those portions were then coded in any of three manners also suggested by Saldana (2009), which did see overlap: *narrative* coding, looking thematically at the stories that participants told; *values* coding, exploring participants' cultural values and worldview; and *domain and taxonomic* coding, which categorizes the knowledge that each used to dictate their behavior and understand their experiences. In this way, the coding could be said to fit in the auspices of grounded theory, as the codes were developed from the data and the themes emerged inductively as I worked back and forth in the data (Greener, 2011)

Research Limitations

Even though Denscombe (2003) states that telephone interviews can be as valid as face-to-face, the environment of the interviews is still a potential issue; since the participants are teaching in many different parts of the world, all of the interviews included in the study were conducted on Skype, and there were occasionally technical issues which may have impaired understanding. An additional issue with the interview process was that it relied on teachers' memories of lessons and student actions, rather than additionally observing classes, an instrument that could have provided greater triangulation of data (Denscombe, 2003). Finally, despite three different countries of origin and diversity of professional experiences, the participants are all white, middle-class males from so-called "Western" countries, which should also be acknowledged when considering their experiences and subsequent conclusions (Heinrich, Heine, & Norenzayan, 2010).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

CASE 1

Lawrence is in his late thirties and is from the Eastern part of the United States, where he teaches in a community college. He has an MA in Applied Linguistics from an American university and has been a teacher for around ten years. In that time, he has never taught abroad, in he started teaching because he wanted to travel. He teaches on the academic side of the English as a Second Language (ESL) Department, so most of his students are immigrants learning English to pursue a degree in higher education, mostly ranging in age from late teens to late twenties. He teaches communication and writing classes.

The courses that Lawrence teaches use textbooks that are based around themes on ways of life in the US; he gave the examples of retirement, business, and pets. He says that, to a limited degree, the course books also contain international situations between non-native speakers of English. Much of his lessons center on the large culture that is contained in those materials, “maybe 80% focused on the US, maybe 20% outside of the US,” in his words. Those lessons are typically used to compare or contrast the stories and information to how students used to live in their home countries:

We talked about life in Korea compared to life of a family in LA. (...) And that book helped us have a little discussion where students could share what it’s like in their countries compared to here. (...) So people got to share, I guess, their perspective, and how maybe it’s different (...). I usually try to group the students, too, when we have these cultural discussions about different places by regions. I try not to have people from the same area or the same country because it’s not really conducive for discussion, for those kinds of topics.

By starting with a family transplanted into a different part of the United States, students may be encouraged to discuss their own circumstances, both in their places of origin and their new locales, and comparing with others, particularly clear in Lawrence’s decision to place students in groups with those from other countries. Thus, we get a glimpse of how he seeks to do much of what Kramsch (2009) advocates regarding a sphere of interculturality, teaching culture as an interpersonal process, and teaching it as difference for the individuals concerned.

Other elements of large culture that Lawrence chooses to include in his classes are holidays that are particular to the US, like July 4th and Thanksgiving (with a focus on the shopping that takes place on Black Friday after Thanksgiving); those topics he usually introduces with a list of questions to see what students already know about them. He uses Halloween to see if students have something similar in their home countries but generally doesn’t discuss Christmas because it doesn’t coincide with their classes. In speaking classes, students sometimes give presentations on similar topics: folklore, weddings, and holidays in their home countries. According to Lawrence, the presentations often have results akin

to the course book materials, where various students realize or point to similarities or differences in their own experience.

Lawrence also includes a current-events portion of his classes where he chooses an article on topics that he finds interesting. Students either read it themselves or he uses it as the basis for a listening activity; in both cases, students answer written content questions in the end, together with some form of class discussion. Examples he gives are about the United States, Afghanistan, an elderly Mr. Universe, and a man with a giant puzzle. Thinking about why he chooses particular articles, he goes back to his life before he was a teacher, towards his first field of study and similar subjects:

So I noticed later on that the articles I would pick tended to be related to those topics. (...) So I try and pick different ones, but I do tend to notice that I do tend to gravitate to stuff that I'm a little more passionate about, I guess.

His choice of topics does reflect Goodman's (1988) contention that what a teacher believes before becoming a teacher can contribute strongly or even dictate their behavior as a teacher (as cited by Borg, 1998, p.29). It is thus illustrative that Lawrence admits to choosing topics which are of interest to him, not necessarily what he believes will be of interest to the students.

In contrast, when it comes to personal inclusions, Lawrence avoids it for the opposite rationale. He mentions his family but does not discuss where he comes from because he says that many of his students have lived in the same area for years and such talk would be superfluous. This is the same reason he does not take any class time to introduce norms of behavior. On the other hand, in communication classes, students are required to give introductory speeches, where they talk about themselves, why they came to the US, and where they come from. For classes involving writing, he says that 20-30% of the essays they write are some form of compare/contrast tasks looking at their personal life in their home country and in their new country. Ultimately, Lawrence says that his choice of topics/tasks related to culture is to strictly generate interest: "I'd like the discussions to be engaging; they may not necessarily be to introduce a norm of American culture."

CASE 2

Dan is in his early forties and is from Australia. He has an undergraduate degree in the Humanities and a CELTA certificate. Having been a teacher for over 15 years, his experience extends to England and Australia, but predominates in continental Europe. He started teaching EFL because he'd become frustrated teaching other high school subjects. He teaches at a university and a private language school in Central/Eastern Europe, and the vast majority of his students are from the same place. At the university, he teaches communication or writing classes for students aged 20 to 24 getting a degree in English, specifically in the British English or Australian English "stream". Classes in the private language school mostly involve young professionals in Cambridge certificate preparation courses, like FCE or CAE.

The curriculum in the private language school centers on course books that have an English bent, as they are for preparation for Cambridge exams. They mostly feature situations and characters from the British Isles, and Dan says that his students seem to prefer that:

Listening to, for example Spanish or Italian people, they realize that they're a lot better, typically. And I'm not sure that they see the worth of listening to a Spanish person speaking English, (...) and they want to have a more accurate model to follow. (...) Just my observations, of course not for everybody, although a lot of people, I can see that they laugh; they laugh when they hear Spanish people speaking English.

For those reasons, he tends to not include international situations of those types in his own classes, echoing Theriot and Tice's (2008) view of classroom experience as a strong determinant for teachers' actions, adapting their beliefs to suit their context. It seems that Dan attempted to introduce more diverse, international materials that students may find more accessible, but replaced them with the more traditional, British-based Cambridge course, as a result of perceived pressure from the students.

In his university classes, Dan chooses his own materials and tends to restrict topics to those related to England, Australia, and his students' country. The materials are typically texts adapted from newspapers, magazines, or the news sites on the Internet, covering current international topics, and usually they try to approach the topics from a variety of perspectives and compare them.

So if I talked about refugees, and that would be a current topic that I would probably do this year at university because it's in the news, I think I would give them the Australian perspective and then the English perspective, and then I'd ask them what they thought. (...) How it affects them, and what their viewpoints are, rather than trying to judge Australians or English people.

Here, he verges close to stereotyping or generalizing by characterizing an "Australian perspective" or "English perspective", yet his reasoning is to broaden the scope of the class discussion and the students' horizons. Therefore, despite a lack of diversity amongst his students, Dan works to create a zone of interculturality and teaches culture as an interpersonal process (Kramsch, 2009).

Other large culture topics that he covers in his class are holidays and sport. Since it has become more popular there, he spends some time on Halloween, particularly because he says that students are interested in it. He talks about its Celtic origins and tries to go beyond the stereotypical portrayal of Halloween, with an original class activity in which students analyze the costumes that people choose to wear and what that suggests about their personality. He looks at several other holidays celebrated both in his students' country and in the UK or Australia in similar ways. His choices and his treatment of holidays point back to his own undergraduate studies and personal interests before he became an English teacher (Borg, 2015). As far as sport, he introduces the students to Australian Rules football by showing them a ten-minute video of a match and asks them to work out the rules in

groups. This eventually leads to a discussion about national sports, showing the interpretive nature of cultures: “(...) it is interesting because they often say that football is their national sport, but some people dispute that it is their national sport.”

When it comes to including personal information, Dan spends the first lesson on introductions, when he tells the students about himself, where he’s from, and his educational background, “just in case they want to check that I’m qualified to teach them,” which reveals his motivation and perhaps that his credentials have been questioned by students in the past (Borg, 2015). He also gives them the opportunity to ask him questions about himself and his experiences but finds that their questions are usually limited to “dangerous animals and about the landscape and the weather.” On the first day, the students create similar profiles for others in the class, a task that Dan generally uses as an ice-breaker also serving as a writing and speaking diagnostic. He limits those kinds of personal inclusions because he believes that the students aren’t very motivated by such topics, judging by the overall lack of interest when he pushes them beyond that introductory lesson. Thereby, he illustrates that engagement is his main motivation for exploiting or avoiding particular topics.

CASE 3

Manny is in his late-thirties and is from the United Kingdom. He has a CELTA and a Dip TESOL and has been teaching for around ten years, with experience in the UK, North America, Southeast Asia, and the Middle East. He started teaching because he wanted a change from his former 9-5 office job. Currently, he is teaching first-year students at a state university in the Middle East in a foundation program. The students are all males, and most are from the region. His classes are centered on General English, preparing students to take a standardized English test, the final requirement before they can start their academic university classes, where the language of instruction is English.

The course is based around several course books, with units either developed around grammar or vocabulary points, or reading texts. The different units all focus on different places and seem to indirectly provide cultural information: “to show what is polite, what is rude in different countries, and things about rules and laws in different countries, as well.” When addressing grammar or vocabulary found in the books, Manny tries to use either a story or anecdote about himself or past students to make it memorable:

I especially find that with vocabulary teaching that I often give them little situations with the vocabulary in it, in order to make it memorable for them, so that they can remember that, and most of the time I try to make it quite funny as well, (...) and they’ll remember it quite easily.

This may actually contradict his training, as the CELTA tends to limit teacher talk time, but Manny has adapted his teaching methods based on what he feels works for his students,

a situation in line with Borg's (1998) own results showing a teacher whose approach was shaped by his classroom experience and "powerfully influenced by his perceptions of what worked well" (p.30)

Other aspects of culture that he includes in lessons are movies, sports, holidays, and food. The first two, movies and sports, don't take up much time in class, but he characterizes as "little asides" during class to keep students' level of attention and motivation up. Holidays generally come up as they do on the calendar and are treated similarly, but he believes that students approach them differently depending on how important they think it is for him, even wishing him a "Happy Christmas". According to Manny, most of the students are fairly well-versed in the broader parts of life in the UK but are still motivated by learning about surprising aspects:

Bonfire Night, or Guy Fawkes Night (...) because they don't have it anywhere else. It's only in Britain, so the students have usually never heard about it, so they're very interested in finding out more about it. (...) So things like, different kinds of food that we eat in Britain or somewhere else, they find that more interesting than anything else, really. He then typically uses those surprising moments, like Agar's (2006) rich points, to generate discussion in class by encouraging students to talk about their own country, sports, or food in an attempt to surprise him or teach him something about where they come from, which he supposes students additionally find motivating.

When it comes to his personal life experience and background, Manny conducts an introductory lesson where he shares a great deal about himself and where he comes from, answering all of the students' questions about him, which he says are extensive because they are so curious about him partly because he expects that he is the first native-speaker of English many of them have ever met. He tells them about his family and even brings in realia, like pictures; he believes such openness fosters a better rapport with the students and encourages them to talk to him and seek extra help when they need it. His approach to class activities concerning students' own backgrounds has evolved since arriving in this position, saying that they are generally not topics for discussion in class. Students often write about family members during writing tasks, but he doesn't make it a speaking activity. He justifies this with two reasons: some students have shown that they are averse to talking about private, personal topics in class, and it is difficult to manage or benefit from, considering the large class sizes he deals with.

Manny speaks more about the limits on including culture in lessons than any of the other respondents. There are institutional restrictions that he mentions, and that the rules can be a bit fuzzy:

We can't talk about politics, religion, sex, or anything really controversial, so officially, we have to be very careful about things like that. However, the students are 18- and 19-year-old boys, and they all know about things, and (...) if you know the class quite well, you can judge what you can talk about and what you can't talk about.

Thus, beyond the rules, there are the cultural sensitivities that he initially gets a feel for before sharing too many stories with his students. His main motivations for risking offense or running afoul of the authorities are pragmatic: he believes the students benefit from it. He often uses those anecdotes to generate interest and spur discussion as a warm-up, to help students make associations with new grammar or vocabulary, or to lighten the mood at the start of the afternoon classes, since the program is intensive and his students spend long days in class. After years in his current position, he has accumulated expert knowledge on his students' needs and adjusted his teaching philosophy and style accordingly (Borg, 2015).

CONCLUSIONS

This paper explored three teachers' cognitions regarding the use of culture in TESOL lessons and how they might be influenced based on their individual contexts. There are key differences resulting from contextual or individual factors, yet certain themes emerge when examining all three cases concurrently in light of the research questions.

1. What sorts of lessons do teachers conduct that focus on or include their own cultures?
2. What sorts of lessons do teachers conduct that include or focus on the cultures of their students?
3. What are teachers' motivations for involving different cultures?
4. How much do the approaches and experiences of teachers' inclusion of culture depend on their context?

The three participants demonstrate that there are few pedagogical limitations on the inclusion of their own cultures in their lessons. They reveal that using their own culture in class can provide source materials for any of the four skills: listening, speaking, reading, and writing. Grammar may have been the least discussed type of lesson. The teachers seem to favor speaking and reading, which is understandable considering the authentic materials available which would be adapted fairly simply, particularly for the two teachers with higher level learners and more freedom in materials development (Knott, 2017).

Similarly, all three teachers indicate a willingness to involve students and attempt to introduce elements of their culture into lessons. Logically, speaking lessons are the most common of this type since it generally consists of eliciting responses from students based on a cultural prompt of some sort. However, the three teachers all describe a range of activities and prompts, which included writing, vocabulary, or even grammar. The teachers also generally avoid stereotyping their students based on their responses, rather viewing them as individuals-in-context (Atkinson, 1999).

The motivation of the teachers to include culturally themed activities is almost entirely to generate interest and benefit their students. Although they do not show an awareness of the concept, each teacher works in different ways to create a zone of interculturality for their students (Kramsch, 2009). In their use of multiple cultures in the classroom, they provide

the platform for their students to develop “the ability to interpret, negotiate, mediate, and be creative in their use and interpretation of English and its cultural references” (Baker, 2009, p.585); however, none of the teachers demonstrates a desire for acculturation or an agenda of enculturation, i.e. cultural indoctrination (Corbett, 2003).

The teachers’ cognitions all show contextual influences in their decisions to include or omit certain topics regarding culture. The research confirmed previous studies showing that despite globalization and current geopolitics, many TESOL students are still curious and motivated to learn about “Western” countries and cultures, particularly when faced with an individual who may be a representative of that novel culture (Holliday, 1999; McKay, 2002). In that light, the participants each show a willingness to adapt their practices based on the reality in the classroom. Thus, we see that the teachers’ decision-making in their socio-educational contexts can be influenced, with little or no consistency, by students’ backgrounds, social norms, or even singular events (Borg, 2015; Cross, 2010).

IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The results additionally reinforce the necessity of teachers’ awareness of the cultures of their students (Burkett, 2016; Johnson, 2006; Troudi, 2005). The implications, therefore, reflect the need for ongoing teacher training as regards cultural knowledge. It is key that such training takes into account the myriad cultures that students may participate in and avoids stereotyping, so as not to oversimplify the complex realities for students. There are similar implications for teacher practice and the need for reflective practice. The teacher participants positively demonstrate cognitions largely dictated by the needs of their students, and the opportunity to develop more democratically oriented classrooms by eliciting information and topics directly from students. Such an approach gives students greater ownership of their own learning and serves to facilitate the goal of the teachers’ in this study, to improve students’ English, with ramifications for curriculum designers, as well (Knott, 2017).

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

While the results are not generalizable, they can be instructive to other TESOL professionals and second-language teachers, or any educators with diverse students. Teacher cognitions regarding culture in second-language learning is an under-researched area, so there are numerous aspects in need of greater exploration. Certainly, there is a need for more in-depth ethnographic research. That research must embrace multiple instruments as a means of triangulation of data collected, particularly as teacher cognition concerns decisions during lessons which create complications when investigated through teachers’ accounts afterwards. Such studies would also benefit from greater diversity of participants, both in terms of personal background and educational background, together with continued variety of teaching contexts, to further explore the role of contextual factors in shaping teachers’ cognitions. However, any future research into teacher cognitions regarding the use of culture must be framed similarly: to understand the development of cognitions with

the ultimate aim of assisting teachers in the classroom to better engage their students and improve student outcomes.

References

- Agar, M. (2006). Culture: Can you take it anywhere? *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 5(2), Article xx. Retrieved October 10, 2015 from http://www.ualberta.ca/~iiqm/backissues/5_2/pdf/agar.pdf.
- Atkinson, D. (1999). TESOL and culture. *TESOL Quarterly*, 33 (4), 625-654.
- Borg, S. (1998). Teachers' pedagogical systems and grammar teaching: A qualitative study. *TESOL Quarterly*, 32 (1), 9-38.
- Borg, S. (2015). *Teacher cognition and language education: Research and practice*. New York: Bloomsbury Academic.
- Burkett, T. (2016). Emirati students' cultural norms and university teachers' awareness: A socio-cultural gap? *TESOL Arabia Perspectives*, 24(1), 5-11.
- Byram, K. & Kramsch, C. (2008). Why is it so difficult to teach language as culture? *The German Quarterly*, 81 (1), 20-34.
- Canagarajah, S. (Ed.) (2005). *Reclaiming the local in language policy and practice*. London: Erlbaum.
- Cohen, L., Manion, L., & Morrison, K. (2011). *Research methods in Education* (Seventh Edition). London: RoutledgeFalmer.
- Corbett, J. (2003). *An intercultural approach to English language teaching*. Clevedon, UK: Multilingual Matters.
- Creswell, J.W. (2007). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five approaches* (Second Edition). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Cross, R. (2010). Language teaching as sociocultural activity: Rethinking language teacher practice. *The Modern Language Journal*, 94 (3), 434-452.
- Denscombe, M. (2003). *The good research guide for small-scale social research projects* (Second Edition). Berkshire, England: Open University Press.
- Dörnyei, Z. (2007). *Research methods in applied linguistics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Graves, K. (2008). The language curriculum: A social contextual perspective. *Language Teaching*, 41 (2), 147-181.
- Greener, I. (2011). *Designing social research: A guide for the bewildered*. London: Sage.
- Holliday, M.A.K. (1999). The notion of "context" in language education. In Ghadessy, M. (ed.) *Text and context in functional linguistics*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.
- Heinrich, J., Heine, S.J., & Norenzayan, A. (2010). The weirdest people in the world. *Behavioral and Brain Sciences*, 33(2-3), 61-83.
- Holliday, A. (1999). Small cultures. *Applied Linguistics*, 20 (2), 237-264.
- Holliday, A. (2007). *Doing and writing qualitative research* (Second Edition). London: Sage.
- Holliday, A. (2011). *Intercultural communication and ideology*. London: SAGE.
- Johnson, K.E. (2006). The sociocultural turn and its challenges for second language teacher education. *TESOL Quarterly*, 40 (1), 235-257.

- Kinzer, C.K. (1988). Instructional frameworks and instructional choices: Comparisons between preservice and inservice teachers. *Journal of Reading Behavior*, XX (4), 357-377.
- Knott, D. (2017). Switching it up: Investigating ways teachers change their practices to reach their students. *The Journal of Teaching English for Specific and Academic Purposes*, 5(4), 629-638.
- Kramsch, C. (1998). *Language and culture*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Kramsch, C. (2009). Cultural perspectives on language learning and teaching. In K. Knapp, B. Seidlhofer, & H. Widdowson. (Eds.), *Handbook of foreign language communication and learning*. Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter.
- Kramsch, C. (2014). The challenge of globalization for the teaching of foreign languages and cultures. *Electronic Journal of Foreign Language Teaching*, 11(2), 249-254.
- Kumaravadivelu, B. (2003). Problematizing cultural stereotypes in TESOL. *TESOL Quarterly*, 37 (4), 709-719.
- Lantolf, J.P. & Johnson, K.E. (2007). Extending Firth and Wagner's (1997) ontological perspective to L2 classroom praxis and teacher education. *The Modern Language Journal*, 91 (Focus Issue), 877-892.
- McKay, S.L. (2002). *Teaching English as an international language*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Pennycook, A. (2007). *Global Englishes and transcultural flows*. Abingdon, UK: Routledge.
- Phillipson, R. (2016). Myths and realities of 'global' English. *Language Policy*, 16(3), 313-331.
- Pratt, M.L. (1991). Arts of the contact zone. *Profession*, 33-40. Retrieved on October 27, 2015 from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25595469>.
- Pring, R. (2004). *Philosophy of educational research*. London: Continuum.
- Richards, K. (2003). *Qualitative inquiry in TESOL*. London: Palgrave MacMillan.
- Risager, K. (2005). Languaculture as a key concept in language and culture teaching. In Priesler, B., Fabricius, A., Haberland, H., Kjærbeck, & Risager, K. (eds.), *The consequences of mobility: Linguistic and sociocultural contact zones*. Roskilde, Denmark: Roskilde University, Department of Language and Culture.
- Saldana, J. (2009). *The coding manual for qualitative researchers*. London: SAGE.
- Strauss, C. & Quinn, N. (1997). *A cognitive theory of cultural meaning*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Theriot, S. & Tice, K.C. (2008). Teachers' knowledge development and change: Untangling beliefs and practice. *Literacy Research and Instruction*, 48(1), 65-75.
- Troudi, S. (2005). Critical content and cultural knowledge for TESOL teachers. *Teacher Development*, 9 (1), 115-129.
- Turner, III, D.W. (2010). Qualitative interview design: A practical guide for novice investigators. *The Qualitative Report*, 15 (3), 754-760.
- Wierzbicka, A. (2003). *Cross-cultural pragmatics: The semantics of human interaction*. Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter.