THE ROLE OF CULTURE IN ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEACHING: FROM STATIC KNOWLEDGE TO DYNAMIC ENGAGEMENT

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Abstract. This article examines the evolving role of culture in English Language Teaching (ELT). Drawing on the distinction between “capital-C Culture,” “small-c culture,” and culture-as-discourse, it argues that contemporary ELT must move beyond superficial, fact-based cultural instruction toward a dynamic pedagogy in which culture is treated as heterogeneous, contested, and inseparable from language. Implications for materials design and teacher preparation are discussed with reference to the Uzbek context.

Keywords: culture; ELT; intercultural competence; discourse; pragmatics; Uzbek language, English Language.

In English Language Teaching, culture has long occupied a paradoxically marginal position: acknowledged as inseparable from language, yet in practice reduced to background facts — capital cities, holidays, famous figures – appended to grammar-focused syllabi. With English now functioning as a global lingua franca among predominantly non-native speakers (Crystal, 2019), learners need the capacity to interpret and negotiate meaning across cultural difference. This article examines three conceptualizations of culture in ELT and argues for a dynamic, discourse-oriented approach that positions culture not as content to be memorized but as a process to be actively engaged.

The oldest strand of cultural instruction equates culture with a civilization’s aesthetic and intellectual achievements: literature, art, philosophy, and history. In the grammar-translation era, learners studied Shakespeare and Dickens as both a model of the language and a window into the “spirit” of English-speaking peoples. While engagement with literary texts develops critical reading and historical awareness, the capital-C approach privileges elite production over everyday experience, reinforces the cultural authority of native-speaker traditions, and does little to prepare learners for the pragmatic challenges of actual cross-cultural interaction.

The communicative turn brought a shift toward small-c culture: everyday practices, behavioral norms, social values, and lifestyle patterns. Textbooks began covering family structure, dining customs, etiquette, and holiday traditions. This was a significant advance, yet the approach carries the risk of essentialism – presenting cultural practices as homogeneous and nationally bounded. When a text book states that “American value individualism”, it erases vast internal diversity across class, region, and ethnicity. Kramsch (1993) critiqued this as the “4F” model – food, festivals, folklore, and famous figures – a surface-level treatment that provides cultural information without developing cultural competence.

A third conceptualization, drawing on poststructuralist and sociocultural perspectives, redefines culture as an ongoing process of meaning-making in social interaction. In Atkinson’s (1999) formulation, culture is the dynamic, contested discursive construction through which groups organize social life, negotiate power, and produce identities. Applied to ELT, these shifts focus from facts to processes: rather

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than asking “What do the British do at Christmas?” the teacher asks “How do different communities construct celebration, and what does this reveal about their values?” It also demands that learners examine their own culture critically, recognizing their practices as one way of doing things among many.

Three principles follow from a discourse-oriented view. First, culture is dynamic and heterogeneous: no culture should be presented as monolithic. Activities inviting learners to explore diversity within their own society – differences between urban Tashkent and rural Khorezm, or between generational attitudes – develop the recognition that “national culture” is an abstraction. Second, learners are already cultural actors whose prior experiences shape their engagement with English. Activities such as cultural autobiographies build the critical self-reflection that Byram (1997) identifies as the foundation of intercultural competence.

Third, language and culture are mutually constitutive. The ways speakers greet, apologize, or express disagreement are cultural acts whose pragmatic force varies across communities. An Uzbek learner who translates elaborate greeting conventions directly into English may be perceived as overly effusive in an Anglo-American business context. These misalignments can only be addressed through instruction integrating language form with cultural function – for instance, discourse completion tasks comparing responses across cultures.

These considerations acquire particular significance in Uzbekistan, a multilingual society at the crossroads of Turkic, Persian, Russian, and Islamic civilizations. Uzbek learners already navigate between languages and cultural codes daily – an asset that ELT pedagogy should build upon. Yet many textbooks used in Uzbek universities were designed for other markets, teacher preparation has emphasized grammar over intercultural pedagogy, and national examinations rarely assess pragmatic competence. Addressing these gaps requires curriculum reform, culturally attentive textbook evaluation, and professional development programs – such as those at the Abdulla Avlani Institute – equipping teachers with strategies for teaching culture as dynamic process.

The role of culture in ELT has evolved from a peripheral supplement to a central concern. A static, fact-based approach is no longer sufficient for learners who will use English in pluricultural spaces. What is needed is a pedagogy that treats culture as heterogeneous and inseparable from language, begins with the learner’s cultural identity, and develops critical awareness and pragmatic sensitivity. For Uzbekistan – whose Silk Road heritage embodies centuries of intercultural exchange – integrating such pedagogy represents both an imperative and an opportunity to prepare globally competent citizens.

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