

Foreword

As language students study, or prepare to study, work and live on the global stage, they need to understand how people in and from other societies operate, how to get on with them and see things from 'the other' point of view as well as their own. This places the understanding of culture at the centre of the language curriculum, as opposed to a marginal option on the fringe of classroom activity. However, one problem is that many teachers do not fully understand how culture relates to the process of language learning. There is a huge need to achieve a re-orientation by defining clearly and painlessly the role of culture in our classrooms.

Building rapport and credibility successfully with people from other cultures demands interpersonal skills of listening actively, observing carefully, and appreciating their values and expectations. It is an emotional process – and not just intellectual – process and, in many ways, the study of culture fits into the domain of 'emotional intelligence' as defined by Salovey and Sluyter (2001).

Traditionally, 'culture' has been seen as an explanation of 'civilisation' or 'life and institutions' of the country whose language is being taught. Of course, there is a place for this knowledge transfer and a need for interactive activity to achieve this, focusing on attitudes and values, institutions and behaviour. But in the long run, and maybe more important, is the learning of 'culture skills': ideas and techniques that help students to adapt and fit into new environments, whether on student exchange, school trips – or studying and working, both at home and abroad.

Most important, however, is attention to the teaching of culture. To be successful, any cultural interchange must be two-way – my experience of you changes me, and vice versa. In the process, all of us become more internationally-minded. We learn to appreciate our own roots through comparison with other societies. Cultural studies should emphasise our common humanity, while studying the different routes we follow to achieve it. It is a pleasure that Gill Johnson and Mario Rivolucci, by inserting their own autobiographical stories, bring to the fore the importance of intercultural exchange. Perhaps that is this book's most important message.

Barry Tomalin
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In offering our cultural perspectives, and 'indulging' in some initial autobiographical material, we align ourselves with the humanistic anthropological tradition which claims that no observation can be neutral or 'objective', and that the reader has therefore a right to know the forces playing on the minds of the observers. In going through the text and experimenting with the activities, you will correct our biases – in your own biased way!

The authors



Culture in our classrooms

We can't get away from it. As we shall see, it is everywhere. It is in the writing of these pages and, inevitably, in what takes place in our classrooms, affecting all aspects of our teaching and our students' learning.

- *low* (where we are) and *high* (where we aren't);
- *up* (what we might despise) and *down* (what we might despise);
- *high* (what we respect) and *low* (what we nevertheless enjoy);
- *in* (where we belong) and *out* (where we don't).

There are widely differing, even conflicting, views within historical and current thought on the notion of culture. In this brief account, it will be for each of us to decide what fits with our own way of thinking. The word 'culture' itself comes from the Italian *cultura*, stemming from *colere*, 'to cultivate'. Its etymology would support the notion, therefore, that culture is a living, changing, moving thing, that grows through a society as it progresses.

Culture and current thinking

Definitions and explanations of culture come to us from two major areas of thinking. The first area for consideration is that of the humanities, where 'it focuses on the way a social group presents itself and others through its material productions, be they works of art, literature, or institutions or artifacts of everyday life, and the mechanisms for their reproduction and preservation through history'.¹

Take, for example, those words these are, is here talking about the things which strike us when we visit a foreign place for the first time: for example, clothes, money, architecture, cooking utensils, etc. It is often the case that the casual tourist will never go beyond these first impressions. It is also the case that visitors to the culture may use these artifacts to make judgments, sometimes negative ones, about the culture they represent.

The second area is that of the social sciences, where 'it refers to what educators like Howard Nostrand call the "ground of meaning", i.e. the attitudes and beliefs, ways of thinking, behaving and remembering shared by members of that community'.² Nostrand is referring to the hidden patterns, the hidden rules of belief and behaviour that govern everyday living, and this is one of the main areas which is explored in social anthropology. Howard Nostrand was an American linguist and francophile, who believed passionately in cross-cultural awareness and spent his life trying to foster better communication between nations. He died in 2004.

A principal aim of *Culture in our Classrooms* is to offer practical activities to help our students understand these secret patterings and better interpret them.

A number of classroom activities from Part B are cross-referenced below and throughout Part A as they may add a further perspective to our points as we make them.

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Culture and society

Culture is 'man's medium; there is not one aspect of human life that is not touched or altered by culture. [...] It is the least studied aspects of culture that influence behavior in the most subtle ways.'

This quote from Edward T Hall, perhaps the grandfather of Western cultural anthropology, illustrates what we, the authors, firmly believe to be true: some of the deepest values, beliefs and patterns of behaviour emerge from the minutiae of everyday life. A simple example taken from Hall's work is that of 'time'. One assumes that everyone knows what time is, and yet in different parts of the world it is clearly perceived to be different. As is evident in the varied behaviours relating to this concept, Hall makes the distinction between monochronic and polychronic understanding of time. In a monochronic culture, it is assumed that a person doing a task cannot be disturbed. They just do something at a time. At a Japanese reception desk in a hotel, guests must wait their turn. In a polychronic culture it is acceptable for a person to multi-task: at a Brazilian reception desk, it is perfectly alright for a client not currently being dealt with to ask the receptionist a quick question. Another way of looking at time is simply to ask yourself what 'time' means. 'Being on time' means in your own country and in some others that you have been.

'Culture refers to widely shared ideals, values, for a given set of uses of categories, assumptions about life and goal-directed activities that become generally or subconsciously accepted as 'right' and 'correct' by people who identify themselves as members of a society.'

In the above quote from Richard Brislin, we have ticked out 'categories' and 'assumptions', as these are much harder to pinpoint than beliefs, perhaps more interesting than ideals and values, which are generally much easier to identify.

- **Categories** affect the way we look at a whole area of culture. In Western music, for example, we tend to use 4/4 rhythm and major keys as a standard. However, in Eastern European music may not use 4/4 and tends to use minor keys. In Western music, we use minor keys to invoke melancholy or sadness. Eastern European composers may not even consider this when using a minor key. Categories govern our thoughts in all the ways powerfully precisely because they are taken for granted.
- **Assumptions** are sometimes deeply buried, although they do surface in proverbs. An example could be the English proverb *The early bird catches the worm*. The assumption here, in the UK, is that it is good to 'do' to be pro-active and energetic to get one's work. These qualities are perceived as deserving of reward. This assumption is paralleled by the assumption in UK schools that the first part of the morning is prime study time. *Culture is always linked to moral values, notions of good and bad, right and wrong, beautiful and ugly.*

Because values are so deeply embedded within a person, people may feel the need to defend them when encountering another set in another society. This is an area that can cause inter-cultural conflict between cultures.

Culture and the individual

The problem with all of this is that there is no attempt to merge what is idiosyncratic with what is culturally consensually accepted by the society within which the individual lives.

Maybe linguistics can help us. Let us take 'Juan', who generally speaks standard Castilian Spanish. Because Juan is 25, he will often use expressions current among people of the same gender in this age group across the middle class in Spanish cities. Some of the things he says have a tinge of the dialect of the town where he lives, Valladolid. Juan comes from a large family and he speaks in ways similar to his siblings and cousins: this is his *famillect*. Some aspects of his speech are completely his own, and cannot be accounted for by age or gender, dialect or 'famillect'. This aspect of Juan's speech is his *idiolet*.

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This linguistic scheme may be usefully transposed to things in the cultural area. Juan sees the world with Spanish eyes, and his beliefs and values are Spanish. His 'ground of meaning' is shared with Spanish people of his class, age and gender. If you move closer to Juan, you will find that his assumptions and attitudes are similar to other Spanish people of his class, age and gender. Move in closer still, and you will find the culture that Juan shares most intimately with members of his family. In the same way that Juan has his own idiosyncratic way of speaking Spanish, his 'idiolet', so he will have his own unique take on the beliefs of the various social groups he belongs to. He will have his own 'idioculture', which will partly coincide with the general culture he belongs to.

Culture and values

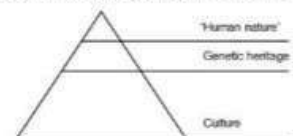
Culture is responsible for the way we make sense of the world. It provides the rules, laws and mores that guide us through our lives inside our societies. Within the comfort zones of our societies, our cultures have made us feel safe because we know exactly what is expected of us and how we should behave in any given situation. We can predict, with some accuracy, how things will be. We also know what sanctions are available (for both law and rule-breakers) for those who do not behave in accordance with our cultural norms and values. Growing up in a society, we internalise the values, rules and they become the 'natural' way of things, so far as we are concerned. However, 'natural order' can be strongly challenged when we step into another culture and experience a different 'natural order' which we may find simply different or even deeply disturbing. We may judge, harshly, these societies which do not conform to our own expectations of 'normal behaviour' and 'acceptable opinions'.

Mario:

When I first went to India, I was completely flummoxed not to be thanked for the present I brought my hosts. What I hoped would have delighted them, a Russian tablecloth, was simply taken and put to one side. Nothing was said. I did not know what to think and felt both confused and let down. The convention in UK culture is for the recipient of a gift to say nothing about it and to proffer thanks. The convention in India is to make it clear that you have received a gift, the belief in this culture being that it is unseemly to make a gift and dull of about a gift, as to do so would be to not take the gift giver's generosity into account.

Since I had a cultural explanation like the above for difference in cultural conventions, it seems so simple, and yet bare intellectual understanding does not, at all, dispel the negative emotion, the culture shock that gurgles through you.

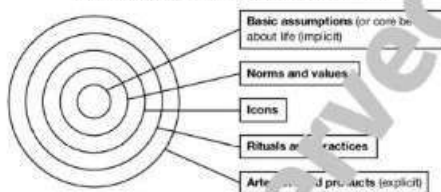
See Scheffé, in *Cultures and Organizations*, calls culture 'the software of the mind'. His analysis describes the enormous effect of culture on our everyday lives. He believes that all humans have what he calls 'human nature' and genetic heritage from our families, by far the most factor influencing our everyday behaviour is culture.



Fons Trompenaars, in his book *Riding the Waves of Culture*, uses the image of an onion to describe culture. The core beliefs of any given society are at the centre of the onion and from these are formed many 'layers', like laws, religion, rituals, education systems, etc. The 'outer skin' of the onion represents aspects of the culture that can be seen by outsiders, like

buildings, transport, money and clothes all of which could be described as 'products' of a culture. Although the products inevitably change over time, they will reflect the beliefs of the society to which they belong.

Onion ring diagram (adapted from Trompenaars' model)



Trompenaars and Hofstede have been roundly criticised in the English Language Teaching world lately for their views, which are considered essentialist in nature. Essentialist thinking perceives the difference between cultures to be a matter of creating and upholding stereotypes and maintaining an 'us versus them' standpoint. However, we think there is much merit in the above metaphors. They have greatly helped us in that they provided a useful framework from which to start thinking about culture. Even if there is doubtless huge diversity within any local culture, we do believe that there are still recognisable patterns of behaviour associated with a particular region, whether or not everyone in that region chooses to abide by the pattern.

Culture and behaviour

Everyone living within a culture, be it regional or national, at some level will instinctively see the difference between what is and what is not acceptable behaviour in any given context. We first learned here of the anthropologist Kate Fox. In the preface to her book *Watching the English*, admitting some nervousness before conducting an experiment into English queue-jumpers, she hypothesised that the reactions were likely to be very negative.

Queue-jumping is to join a queue surreptitiously, near or at the front, rather than at the back as is normal in the UK. For the majority of English people, this practice is tantamount to a deliberate insult. Although others in the queue may be furious with the queue jumper, they tend not to chastise the sinner with more than a sigh, a 'tut tut' or the raising of an eyebrow. Some object to queue-jumping but confrontation is difficult for many English people. However, queue jumpers will be seen to understand that they have sinned. People in the queue may talk together about the rudeness of the queue jumpers or give them meaningful admonishing looks. In poor sinners may not even be aware there is a queue they should be in. Kate Fox knew, before beginning her experiment, that she would be, at best, an object of reproach and, at worst, of hatred. If this all sounds extreme or even trivial, ask yourself how you feel when someone contravenes an important behaviour rule in your culture.

Given that cultural norms provide us with comfort and stability, if we are confronted with manifestations that challenge these norms, we may react quite fiercely. Often the shock we suffer (based entirely on our own norms) leads to negative judgement and, without communication between the two sides, opinions can become entrenched and conflict can occur.

A female immigrant coming to the UK from, say, Afghanistan, could be appalled at the 'immodest' way in which UK women dress. She may, without any dialogue on the subject,

see UK or Western women as people of low morals, prostitutes, sexual predators, temptresses of men. Equally, Western women might be shocked by their first encounter with their Muslim counterpart wearing her hijab. Without dialogue, they may see the Muslim woman as subjugated, enclosed or even, perhaps, a religious fanatic or a potential sexual offender. Clearly, with these attitudes, co-operation and trust are going to be out of the question.

These dress examples, that symbolise deeply-held beliefs, show how intense emotional cultural tenets can be, and how much culture is a matter of the heart, not just of the head. This explains why cultural misapprehensions can sometimes lead to judgement, violence and even, in extreme cases, the killing of individuals.

A valuable tool to help us reflect on cultural differences is provided by Richard Shweder⁴. He gives us four ways of perceiving, four standpoints:

- **Downward evolutionist** I look down on this because of its cultural practice.
- **Upward evolutionist** I look up to this cultural practice.
- **Universalist** I see this cultural practice as essentially different from mine but as being fundamentally the same.
- **Relativist** This cultural practice is different, but I'm fully comfortable about doing it myself in the context of the other culture.

We can share this type of anthropological thinking with our students and help them to apply Shweder's framework to their own lives.

Culture within culture

Within national cultures there are sub-cultural practices (rules and behaviours) that differ from the national patterns. These can reveal a great deal about the community or group by whom they are used. The fact that they exist at all shows us how deep, diverse and how very complex even 'home' culture is. It is important to note that people living under the banner of any given nationality may have different ethnic backgrounds, different degrees of acculturation, and different amounts of respect for the culture within which they live. Because of this, they may have different ways of doing things, as well as recognising the national norm.

Ways of behaving at home and at school, as also in the workplace, are examples of sub-cultural practices. When we start a new job, we are aware that things may be done differently by our new employers. Our children, when they come into contact with other families, tend to contrast what they see there with their own family experience.

Go to the supermarket and you will be told, rather condescendingly, by an adolescent male that you have wasted better things to do with her time than cook meals from ingredients! After the supermarkets and ready meals were there to make life easier for women, it, besides, his family always got to choose what and when they wanted to eat individually. The implication being that choosing to cook for my family meant I was wasting time, being old-fashioned and even perhaps a bit mean, not offering choice regarding menus or time of eating! Clearly, here a rather different set of values regarding food and mealtimes was in place in our two families. This boy had, as we often do, judged without thinking of the advantages of my approach to food and mealtimes, simply because he was used to something different.

We often fall into the trap of judging something negatively at first, when it is different from or challenges the way we know of doing things.

It is worth noting again that even deciding what the word *culture* means is a matter of debate. In the past, culture was only talked about in terms of the arts and, then, only rarified forms, such as certain types of classical music or literature and the work of established 'safe' artists.

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The quality of silence
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Gill:
One of my schoolteachers once urged us to go to a concert to watch a famous symphony orchestra play Beethoven's 9th because it would do us good to 'be of culture'. Clearly this teacher only valued what we now know as 'high' culture, not other cultural manifestations, which must have been apparent to him, did not count for much in his estimation.

Some art critics still make a distinction between these types of art and more 'modern' forms, which are arguably more transient and appeal more (defenders of 'high culture' would say) to the 'lower classes', the 'masses', the 'popular audiences'. Good reviews in prestigious newspapers will help artists gain access to 'high-culture' status, as will the patronage of a famous, respected art collector. People who view culture in this way do not consider other products of a society as belonging to the umbrella of 'culture'. Sometimes these two standpoints are categorised as 'culture with a big C' or 'high culture' (the arts), and 'culture with a small c' or 'low culture' (other cultural products). From this view you may consider singers like Kylie Minogue and Madonna, to be 'high' culture, as belonging to the area of mass culture, pop culture: something also somewhat dependent on fashion, much more ephemeral, and therefore of less 'cultural' value.

When we look at the above paragraph we are aware that the words we are using may give offence. Language is inextricably tied up with culture, and the hope will become dear, and words are often culturally loaded, so if we are to communicate rather than another, we give an initiated listener or reader a window into our own cultural heritage, or 'cultural capital'.

Cultural capital

Cultural capital, which leads to cultural power, is a sociological term, coined by Pierre Bourdieu and Jean-Claude Passeron (sociologists and philosophers)¹⁰ in an attempt to explain under-achievement in French schools. Cultural capital includes knowledge, skill and education: in fact, it is the resources a person has which can give them the expectation of a higher status in society. Parents provide children with cultural capital, for example, when they impart the attitudes and knowledge that help make the educational system a place in which their children will feel at ease and therefore can easily succeed.

Bourdieu divided cultural capital into three sections:

- **Embodied** embodied in the self, over time, through socialisation in the family and elsewhere. Ways of behaving and communicating effectively (or not) are learned in this way and become part of each individual's character.
- **Objectified** Gained from things that can be owned: consumer goods, books, works of art, 'high culture', etc. However, Bourdieu would argue that cultural capital may not be gained from this ownership if we understand the attitudes 'in the right way'. Owning a painting neither makes us an expert on what the painter intended us to feel, nor indeed an expert on art in general.
- **Institutionalised** In the form of qualifications, certification from institutions.

We know that children, growing up in any country, will have very different expectations of their lives, depending on the kind of upbringing they have had, the attitudes of their parents, of their teachers and of the institutions in which they are educated. Bourdieu argues that the more cultural capital we have, the higher are our expectations, the more success we will have and thus the more power we can, as adults, wield in society.

Thomas Sowell, a respected American economist¹¹, believes the cultural capital (attitudes and beliefs, in this case) that migrants bring to a new homeland is far more important in determining their fate than the homeland's economy, culture or politics. Migrants to a new country may feel some aspects of their own cultural capital are undervalued in the new environment and may actively seek to acquire new cultural capital that is more acceptable,

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Learning the language, understanding the social rules (and the attitudes behind them), acquiring some of the products: all of these are obvious steps towards this aim. Other children of immigrants acquire cultural capital via school. Problems may arise if the values learned in the school are not compatible with those of the parents.

Mario:
My Italian father migrated from Italy to the UK in the 1930s. In Italy he had a lot of cultural capital of a middle-class intellectual. His reason for migration was to escape to an Englishwoman from a coal-mine-owning family. On arrival in the UK he began 'investing' in his wife's cultural capital, assimilating her language, her values, her attitudes, and her upper-class assumptions. In his English school my father was more upper-class and right-wing than he had been in the 1930s. For the rest of his life, back in Italy Sowell's and Bourdieu's concepts of cultural capital would not seem to me when I think back to my dad.

Cultural codes

As humans, we are always searching for meaning, and will therefore interpret everything we see, hear, smell, taste, etc. in order to do this. Ferdinand de Saussure¹², the father of a field of study called semiotics, calls these 'units of interpretation' signs. Signs can be sounds, texts, images, objects, odours, tastes or actions. These, it is argued, have no real meaning in themselves, but have meaning attributed to them by us. We experience the 'sign' and interpret it according to our own definitions of meaning, relating the sign to these, amassing a kind of database of the meanings of the sign in our lives.

It is this idea of attributing meaning that is at the core of semiotics and the work of Ferdinand de Saussure, for whom a 'sign' is divided into two parts: the *signifier* (the form a sign takes) and the *signified* (the idea or concept it represents). This idea can be represented in the table below:

	Signified
Signifier	Freedom Luxury Financial ability Form of transport

We will all receive signs in a slightly different way, as our reading of them will be influenced by our 'cultural codes', which we have amassed, growing up largely within a home culture, thereby creating a 'code' for language, incorporating our individual as well as national cultural 'dialects' (accents) which we can use to interpret signs. It is inevitable, therefore, that what we perceive as reality is in fact culturally encoded, and thus becomes *culturally loaded*. Let us consider another example. For different groups of 'receivers' of the sign Ernesto 'Che' Guevara, there may be a wide range of differing responses:

	Signified (different for different receivers)		
Signifier	Freedom fighter Terrorist Army officer	Patriotic soldier Common criminal Bandit	Quejido Cultural icon