

## **Interpreting an ELT Course: Perspectives and Goals of Interweaving Teaching of Culture and Teaching of Language Expressed by L2 English Language Instructor**

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### **Abstract**

The primary aim of the paper is to present an analysis of the perspectives of an English as an L2 instructor on an advanced-level English as Second Language (ESL) course. This ESL course attempted at an integration of the teaching of culture with the teaching of language. A study was conducted on this course to explore the opportunities and the process of culture learning in classroom discourse. The data for this paper is taken from this study. To be more specific, this paper attempts at an analysis of the opinions, goals, perspectives of the instructor in relation to this advanced ESL course.

**Keywords:** Culture Teaching, Pedagogy, SLA, ELT

### **1. Introduction**

#### ***B.A. 1st Semester Alternative English***

The setting of the study is the first descriptive code of the situational context of the speech event first proposed by Hymes (1974) and later defined by Kramsch (1993). As far as the course investigated in this paper is concerned, it was advanced-level English as an L2 course in North Lakhimpur College, an Autonomous college affiliated to Dibrugarh University in the northern region of upper Assam of North East India.

The Alternative English course, the first of the two-semester sequence that constitutes the first-year English, was offered during the July-December Semester of 2014. It is an optional course for undergraduate learners who do not opt for the Modern Indian Languages course. It is supposed that learners who opt for this course should have at least received ten consecutive years of teaching of the English language in schools under Secondary Education Board of Assam, Assam Higher Secondary Education Council, and Central Board of Secondary Education or have had similar learning experience otherwise. Before enrolling in the course, all the 12 learners had their school education in schools within Assam.

### **2. The ELT Syllabus**

The researcher was provided with the course syllabus two weeks before the start of the course. The English program Curriculum at North Lakhimpur College termed as "Alternative English: Paper I" designed for Semester I students of the college describes the objective of this course as a language course that looks to develop advanced-level reading and writing skills in English.

According to the course description, “students opting for this paper are expected to have some command over the English language”. Taking the basic English language skills for granted, the course states that the students’ “skills in writing and literary appreciation would be tested and they would be encouraged to develop individual idioms”. The students are asked to study “this paper comprising poems by English, American and Indian writers” in order to “familiarize the students with poetry as genre and also to appreciate the cultural and social backgrounds against which these masterpieces were produced”. The course offers a syllabus that has poems composed by English and American poets which make the course a very fruitful research site for cultural discussions.

Specifically, the following course activities were listed in the syllabus. In terms of reading and writing requirements, the students were to write two essays during the semester. The course also featured a midterm exam and a final exam, both in written form and based on what was covered in the Tuesday class lectures. Students also had regular written homework from the textbook and from online reading texts assigned by *Bhola Mastor*, pseudonym of the instructor, as well as a weekly vocabulary quiz.

Altogether, the reading and writing components comprised 95 marks of the final grade. In terms of speaking skill requirements, students were to give oral presentations on course-related topics chosen by the students in the classroom in the presence of all the faculty members of the department of English of North Lakhimpur College at least twice during the semester. Altogether, the listening and speaking section comprised 5 marks of the final grade. 75% attendance was considered compulsory and there was no marks allotted for class attendance.

The Alternative English course offered at North Lakhimpur College, as per the syllabus, focused more on the development of English reading and writing skills of the learners. This fact was later re-confirmed by *Bhola Mastor* in his last interview with the researcher by the end of the semester.

## **2. The Interview with the Instructor**

*Bhola Mastor* was interviewed by the end of the semester for the reason that the course under study was a newly designed course and it was offered for the first time in the college. It was speculated that the instructor, *Bhola Mastor*, would be in a better position to inform and explain to the researcher about the perspectives, goals and expectations that he had from the course and the learners more elaborately after the end of the of the course. The structure of the interview was designed in the following way:

### **A. Opening**

1. Greet the instructor.
2. Check whether he is ready.

### **A. Possible Questions**

1. Could you please tell me about your perspectives of the broad objectives of English as L2 courses at the undergraduate level?
2. Could you please elaborate on the learning goals of the learners in the first semester Alternative English course at North Lakhimpur College?

3. Could you please tell me about the different kinds of challenges and problems faced by you in the course under scrutiny?
4. How do the specificities of the learners of the course under scrutiny modify, if it does, your methods of teaching?
5. Please comment on the integration of the teaching of culture with the teaching of language in an L2 course.
6. How do you define the relationship between the two?
7. Do you think that the course syllabus and the textbook given to you in the course help in the integration of the teaching of culture with the teaching of the L2? Please explain.

### **B. Two More Questions**

1. How do you define cultural knowledge as such?
2. In what ways can the present course be modified to reflect more of the perspectives that you have on this subject?

### **C. Ending**

1. What additional remarks do you want to make on the subject of the incorporation of culture into the teaching of L2?
2. Check if he has any questions on the study.
3. Wish him good luck.

A summary of the answers that *Bhola Mastor* gave to the questions asked by the researcher is presented in the following sections.

### **3. Instructor's Perspectives on the Principal Objectives of Alternative English I Course**

*Bhola Mastor's* opinion on the issue of the overarching goal of an advanced level English language course was that more than the listening and speaking skills, the focus in these courses should chiefly remain on the development of the reading and writing skills. Listening and speaking skills should no longer be the centre of attention at this level and after the end of these advanced courses in English the learners should reach a high proficiency level in the two skills of reading and writing.

As far the observed first semester Alternative English course was concerned, *Bhola Mastor's* emphasis was on the development of learner competence at the discourse level. He understood this competence both as the reading comprehension of the learners beyond the sentence level in a text and as the writing ability beyond the sentence level that entails clarity, logic and structured texts. He was aware of the fact that his instructional strategies and practices should lead him towards these broader goals.

A couple of examples were given by *Bhola Mastor* in relation to his teaching of new vocabulary and sentence structures. He said that he focused on comparing and contrasting word pairs in collocation phrases and conjunctions commonly used in discourse to teach new vocabulary. He adopted a similar method of comparing and contrasting various usages of sentences patterns in discourse to teach new sentence structures.

#### **4. Instructor's Opinion on the Integration of Culture with the Teaching of L2**

In his interview with the researcher, *Bhola Mastor* appeared positive in his attitude towards the incorporation of culture into the teaching and learning of language. He was very concerned with the question of the methods of this incorporation. He specifically mentioned the fact that the incorporation of culture into language teaching must follow a step by step course. This step by step course of teaching should entail a progressive approach with reference to the teaching of the material, manner, and perspective related to culture.

Explaining this step by step approach towards the incorporation of culture into language teaching, *Bhola Mastor* stated that the teaching of the culture specific materials and culture specific manners should receive the focus of attention in the at the primary and intermediate level of language teaching. But the teaching of the culture specific perspectives should be given the prime focus by the language instructor at the advanced level.

Answering the question of the method of teaching culture specific perspective, *Bhola Mastor* further mentioned the need for involving the learners in the understanding of the culture perspectives in such a way that the negotiation for meaning related to the cultural perspectives turns out to be the result of the joint effort of the instructor and the learners.

Besides the instructor's introductory and mid-way discussions of the different cultural phenomena, the interactions between the instructor and the learners and among the learners themselves should give rise to the co-constructed understanding of the cultural perspectives brought up for discussion during the class sessions. *Bhola Mastor* was willing to believe that the incorporation of culture into the teaching of language required a facilitating approach that made it possible for the learners to re-understand and re-invent the underlying culture perspectives.

#### **5. Relationship between Teaching of Culture and Teaching of L2**

Elaborating on the relationship between the teaching of culture and the teaching of L2, *Bhola Mastor* stated that in the realization of the teaching of culture in a language classroom, cultural knowledge needs to be grouped into two categories. Cultural knowledge embedded very closely in the language should be kept in the first category and the cultural knowledge separable from the teaching of language and linguistic expressions should be the content of the second category. To give evidence of the first category of cultural knowledge he referred to the pragmatic aspects of the English language in which the culture specific manners were embedded in the linguistic expressions themselves. He cited the customs, traditions, and festivals or holidays specific to the English culture as examples of the second category of cultural knowledge.

Commenting further upon the issue of the teaching of culture in advanced-level language courses like the present one, two specific schemes of action were suggested by *Bhola Mastor*. The first and foremost thing to do, according to *Bhola Mastor*, was to insert an independent unit in the syllabus for the teaching of culture. In this unit, both the two categories of cultural knowledge mentioned by him could be taught to the learners adopting separate means of teaching.

A cultural studies unit or civilization course should be created to teach the category of cultural knowledge separable from the language and linguistic expressions. The first category of cultural knowledge should be introduced to assist the understanding of the second category of cultural knowledge whenever there is a need for it. *Bhola Mastor* refers to his idea of co-constructed understanding of the cultural perspectives behind different cultural phenomena in the negotiation of meaning between the instructor and the learners and among the learners themselves as he offers his second plan of action for the teaching of culture in language education.

## 6. Conclusion: Instructor's Notion of Cultural Knowledge

*Bhola Mastor* understands cultural knowledge as a collection of micro-level and macro-level facts and information about the target culture. The micro-level facts are related to the nuances of daily life in the target culture environment and the macro-level information are related to the socially significant issues in the target culture.

Talking about the typology of the cultural knowledge he dealt with in the first semester Alternative English course under study, *Bhola Mastor* referred to the culture specific topics that the poems in the course illustrated. He also mentioned the discussions of the micro-level cultural aspects that the learners were asked to study in the language courses at the secondary level, before they enrolled in the present course.

He further mentioned that the macro-level cultural aspects should be the focus of attention at the advanced-level. He gave the example of the course under study as a satisfactory course to teach the macro-level aspects of culture as it offers a discussion of perspectives related issues of social, political, linguistic and literary significance. It covers an area of culture from verse forms, language variety, and concept of death to mythological stories. Nevertheless, *Bhola Mastor* was of the opinion that incorporation of more recent and up-to-date topics in the texts prescribed in the course would benefit the learners more.

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