

# THE IMPORTANCE OF CULTURE ON TEACHING AND TESTING ENGLISH AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE

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## **Abstract**

The present article concentrates on the way how culture is seen as an inseparable part of foreign language acquisition, namely English, with the focus on the process of its teaching and testing. The author attempts to present a brief overview of the findings of numerous researches analysing mutual relationships between culture and language teaching on one hand, as well as culture and language testing on the other hand. Many educators stress the importance of a dichotomous relationship between culture and language. Therefore, more specifically, the paper focuses on the importance of embedding culture into the process of teaching and testing of English at all levels of CEFR.

**Key Words:** culture, English, language, testing, teaching,

## **Abstrakt**

Prezentovaný článok sa snaží poukázať na skutočnosť, že kultúra sa považuje za neoddeliteľnú súčasť procesu osvojovania si cudzieho jazyka, konkrétne angličtiny, so zameraním na proces výučby a testovania. Autor sa pokúša predstaviť stručný prehľad výsledkov viacerých výskumov, ktoré skúmali vzájomné vzťahy medzi kultúrou a výučbou jazyka na jednej strane; a kultúrou a testovaním jazyka na strane druhej. Mnohí pedagógovia zdôrazňujú dôležitosť dichotomického vzťahu medzi jazykom a kultúrou. Práca sa preto konkrétnejšie zameriava na dôležitosť začlenenia kultúry do procesu výučby a testovania angličtiny na všetkých úrovniach CEFR.

**Kľúčové slová:** Kultúra, angličtina, jazyk, testovanie, výučba,

## **1 Language teaching and culture**

Language teaching as a process of developing communication skills cannot be taught without culture. This truth derives from the fact that language teachers teach not only the language, but the aspects of culture of the language's nation, too. The dialectical connection between the language and the culture has always been a concern of language teachers and educators. A language stores all social lives and experience of a nation, and reflects all characteristics of the nation's culture. It has been emphasized that without the study of culture, teaching a foreign language is often inaccurate and incomplete. Language study in general can become meaningless if students know nothing about the people who speak the target language or the place where the target language is used. In the following paper, after presenting relevant aspects of the necessity to embed culture into ELT process, I will comment on the following issues: learning a language is much more than mere understanding of syntactical rules and comprehending words; the validity of CEFR

linking to a language test is often questioned due to its many limitations; and vocabulary of a language is inextricably bound up with culture.

### *1.1 Language testing and culture*

Language assessment, similarly as language teaching, cannot be performed without the cultural element being involved. If a student is not familiar with the culture of a nation, it is highly probable that he will have problems understanding the language of the nation and consequently performing well at language tests. Culture values are both reflected by and carried through the language. One of the many aspects of language is that of mental schemata. Decoding written or spoken form of the language and its comprehension are two main tasks for a successful language learner. In language learning, the elements, which influence the performance at a language test, are linguistic knowledge, the knowledge of cultural background, language skills, and general intelligence of a student.

To be able to decode the word symbols, one must master basic linguistic knowledge of phonetics (esp. important for oral performance), lexis, and morphological and syntactical rules of the language. What happens rather often is that although students already possess the above mentioned knowledge, they still cannot comprehend the test items completely. Therefore, a more appropriate approach would be to assume that the understanding of the cultural content of what one reads is a crucial factor not only in reading comprehension but also in an overall test performance. We should not, however, forget other language skills. Reading may seem to be of the highest importance when taking a written test, but the notion of a global student emphasises the development of all four language skills. Listening, as well as reading, is an active process that involves construction of meaning, i.e. sense, beyond simple decoding. The activation of what is known about the world, about the culture, clearly helps processing the aural and written codes.

The importance of including cultural context in testing reading and listening becomes a question of a general need rather than of a personal choice. Reading and listening in English are becoming increasingly important for every person learning the English language, either as a compulsory subject at school, or as a part of self-development. Today's global world puts new challenges before us making us read and listen in English, not only for academic purposes, but also for everyday life. A real contact with authentic language material has many beneficial effects in language acquisition. Some researchers believe that reading facilitates language development (Martin-Chang & Gould, 2008). The more a person reads, the more he develops his vocabulary knowledge. Teachers of English have always wanted to have students with good listening skills. The reason for that lies in a desire to implement authentic context in the lesson, especially for communicative purposes.

### *1.2 CEFR linking and its shortcomings*

Each language carries knowledge and cultural information and it reflects the substantial and particular ways of thinking of the people, especially with regards to the competences defined by the Common European Framework for Languages (CEFR). The EFL teachers performing their

practises in the common European environment have to bear this notion in their minds. One has to remember that it refers to all levels of English not depending on whether we take a language item designed at A1 or C2 level of CEFR. Culture is embedded in even the simplest act of language (Hao, 2000; Kramersch, 1993); it is an inseparable part of the way in which we live our lives and the way we use the language. In this regard, Kramersch (1993) maintains that every time we speak we perform a cultural act. Since language is the carrier of culture, every act of communication possesses its own pattern, value, custom, and a way of life. It is often claimed that the influence of culture and the background of communication act is greater than the knowledge of the language itself. The same cannot be applied to language testing in general, however. A student can (under certain circumstances) perform well in a test of English grammar even though he has no cultural background, but, whenever it comes to testing his abilities to perform in real life situations, either by checking his vocabulary in certain situations or by leading him to comprehend the deep meaning of texts, the background knowledge seems to be of high importance. As Cook (2003, p. 52) mentions: “The successful interpretation of language (spoken or written) in context depends upon the degree to which the participants share conventions and procedures, including those related to paralinguage. Such conventions and procedures, together with the values and beliefs behind them, are elements of cultural background knowledge... “.

The success in the test and its linking to CEFR levels is clearly connected. The learning English and its assessment is undergoing a critical change, which is particularly due to the establishment of CEFR. The original idea of CEFR was to describe language proficiency in reading, writing, speaking, and listening on a 6-level scale. It was meant to be used to overcome the barriers of communication among language instructors, educators, curriculum designers, and agencies working in the field of language development by providing a common basis for describing and discussing stages of language development and the skills needed to reach different levels of language proficiency. These days, however, we see that it is becoming more common to see it as one of the means of reporting the practical meaning of test scores. Moreover, CEFR is now being adopted as a tool in standards-based education not only in Europe, but is applied to national curricula much further beyond its original borders. The rapid spread of the use of the CEFR across Europe and other parts of the world can be accounted for by the ease with which it can be used in standards-based assessment, and form the basis for policy areas such as immigration (Krumm, 2007). The belief that the CEFR scales have been constructed on a principled analysis of language use, or a theory of second language acquisition, is mistaken. As North (2007) points out the scale descriptors were drawn from existing scales in many different testing systems from around the world, and were placed within the CEFR scales because teachers’ judgments of their difficulty could be scaled using multi-faceted Rasch measurement pattern. From a practical point of view, when a learner of English gets a certain test score and the examiner is able to link this score to a particular level of CEFR, then it becomes much clearer for the examiner, and the learner, too, what the actual level of English of the learner is and what he can do with it. Thus, both sides of the language assessment situation are provided with valuable information about the current state of the learner’s language competences.

The argument that the descriptors are not descriptive enough to render a complete image of how contextual factors affect the particular language performance across the levels is referred to more often these days. Weir (2005) names this inability with the term *context validity*.

The need for contextual, or as some authors call it, intercultural level of performance descriptors (Kramersch, 1986) is another point of interest for us. No thorough analysis is needed to see that some of the descriptors in CEFR refer to specific situations, while others do not. At level B2 for instance we can find descriptors referring to real-life situations, e.g. buying a travel ticket, but others are not based on this reference. Effect-driven testing, therefore, requires that the principles of the test design link directly to the test performance and the intended space for generalization and context realization. Rating scales that operate with the test purpose are used to determine what we know about the context of the language use in ways that are not static, which, however, cannot be said about the standard proficiency descriptors. Kramersch (1986) argues that they (standard proficiency descriptors) can still be adjusted in a way to reflect the interactional competence of the speakers under condition that relevant descriptions of language performance are context sensitive, socially specific, and inherently local in meaning.

It is therefore illogical to think of rating scales, or descriptors themselves, in terms of universal instruments to measure everything and always. Krumm (2007, p. 667) has a clear opinion on the issue saying: "...in a world of social, cultural, and individual heterogeneity, one instrument and approach can neither address all situations and contexts nor meet all needs. Although the CEFR is not intended to be applied uniformly to everybody, in some cases it is applied in just such a fashion..." On the whole, if we do not take these limitations of CEFR linking into consideration, we might come to a position that mere comparison based on the scales alone might be more misleading than valuable. That is also the reason why "it is not surprising that a number of studies have experienced difficulty attempting to use the CEFR for test development or comparability purposes" (Weir 2005, p. 283). I am aware that the present argumentation requires a deeper analysis. My ambition is, however, to cover the most relevant issues within the studied area. Yet, one more aspect of raising cultural awareness in language teaching deserves attention, and that is the domain of culturally depended vocabulary, which is described in the following section.

### ***1.3 Vocabulary and the notion of culture***

Language is always created in a certain socio-historical context with direct influences derived from it. As a communication tool it has to be seen not only as an item carrying specific information about the language but also as the carrier of the information about the culture, aspects of the society, facts about the history of the nation using this language, etc. Therefore, a simple assumption that it (meaning a language), in a way, reflects features of the nation and contains important aspects of cultural history of a nation seems to be correct. There are numerous examples proving that. One may just think of various proverbs, slang words, or some stylistic features that together with vocabulary define the language.

When we think of a language, we have to consider vocabulary the pillar of the language. Individual words and phrases reflect the differences of culture most obviously and extensively.

Their special importance lies in a fact that many times a simple translation is not sufficient and readers (esp. test doers) may not find a proper equivalent in their mother tongue, which creates a comprehension barrier for them. Hofstede (2001) mentions an example of English – French translation problem that French has no precise equivalent for an English word *achievement*. On the other hand, there may be some instances, when we can find translation equivalents, which are however incomplete, and thus, the lack of cultural background or its connotation may still be the reason for already mentioned comprehension barrier. Let's take into consideration a simple word like *red*. In the western world red conveys the meaning of danger or some warning. Contrary to that, in the eastern countries, red colour is usually associated with happiness or fortune. The same can be seen in seeing numbers. From nation to nation, numbers have different interpretations. If we want to wish someone happiness in English, we will probably not mention number 13. But in other parts of the world this number means exact opposite, e.g. China. The same rules can be applied to bigger language units than words, to sentences. The issue of proverbs and idiomatic expressions is a broad topic and an adequate analysis would require more space than one chapter in this paper. Despite that we agree with Graves, Cooke, and Laberge (1983) in stating that activating prior knowledge or knowledge of the world and applying this knowledge to new input greatly facilitates processing and understanding.

## Conclusion

Today's world is very often referred to as a global village. Eliminating boundaries among countries has led to a "smaller world" where cross-cultural communication becomes an every day's routine. This however does not mean that cross-culture differences are becoming smaller, too. It looks as if the exact opposite was true. As people responsible for teaching English, we should not only teach the knowledge of the language, but also try our best to present the social and cultural aspects of the English countries and provide the learners with the background knowledge of literature, history, geography, and customs. This is the only way we can get better understanding of the differences between the English culture and other cultures of the world. To eliminate the comprehension barriers and improve our overall abilities in English in all its aspects, not forgetting the testing procedures, is our main goal for the nearest future.

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