



WHY DOES CULTURE MATTER IN ELT?

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This article deals with the issue of integrating cultural knowledge into ELT. Culture is presented as an integral part of language that often determines the way we perceive reality. These perceptions may differ partially or completely across cultures, which is why intercultural communication frequently results in misunderstandings. One area in which such problems are extremely common is speech acts. The use of compliments, complaints and invitations in English and Slovene are discussed in order to illustrate the difficulties facing non-native speakers. It is concluded that developing cultural competence is essential to successful ELT and that such teaching not only helps students communicate more effectively and appropriately, but that it also raises their level of tolerance toward others and contributes to a higher level of intercultural awareness.

Key words: Slovene, English, intercultural communication, speech acts

INTRODUCTION

I doubt that learners, when first starting to learn a foreign language, realize what an adventurous and never-ending task they are embarking upon. Not only are they faced with having to learn new words and master until-then-unknown linguistic rules, they are also expected to become familiar with the cultural knowledge that goes with the language. While vocabulary and grammar may be difficult to learn in all of their details and complexities, the intercultural component of language learning is in most cases an even harder nut to crack. For one thing, culture seems to be a much more elusive category than language and is therefore only rarely taught explicitly. In the absence of suitable materials and methodology, many teachers assume, or at least hope, that learners will somehow get the hang of it by themselves. And they often do, only not always as effectively as we would like, nor always in the way we expect them to.

It is precisely for this reason that my article focuses on the intercultural dimensions of fo-

reign, in this case English, language learning and teaching. It draws on some of the topics covered by the book *Across Cultures* (Šabec and Limon, 2001), hoping to point out those culture-related areas to which we should pay special attention while teaching English to our students. The book deals with Slovene-British-American intercultural communication, but I believe that there are so many parallels between speakers of Slovene and Croatian that the book could be of benefit to Croatian learners of English as well.

LANGUAGE USE IN ITS CULTURAL AND SOCIAL CONTEXT

It is often said that language and culture are inseparable and that as soon as we start learning language we also start learning about its culture. It is no doubt true that the two are indeed very closely connected and that language to a great extent mirrors the social values, attitudes, beliefs and norms of a specific so-



ciety. Speakers belonging to different social and cultural backgrounds often perceive reality differently; they judge it according to their own specific standards, have their own traditions and conventions, allusions, references and ways of behavior; and as a result, they do not always agree in their views. This discrepancy between different cultures may be complete or the cultures may only partially overlap, but in either case the danger of potential misunderstanding or even communication breakdowns remains. This danger might be in fact even greater in the case of only partial cultural overlap, where the students are not aware of the differences and thus feel free to rely on their own mother tongue, transferring its patterns to the target language. It is thus not unusual for an English speaker to be offended by a Slovene speaker and vice-versa even though no harm was intended on either side. The problem is that a speaker's native language together with its cultural implications is an integral part of that person's taken-for-granted intuitive knowledge, but when speaking another language the speaker is on much more treacherous ground. There the speakers need to explore new concepts and rules or else risk making mistakes, being misunderstood, labeled as impolite and the like. They can best explore these new concepts by comparing the target culture to their own. A comparative approach allows them not only to learn about the differences between the two cultures, but also raises awareness of their own heritage. The most effective way to avoid the pitfalls of intercultural communication is therefore to familiarize students with at least the basic norms and conventions underlying language use that apply to specific societies. Since language is not used in a vacuum, out of context, such knowledge is a necessary prerequisite for any successful communication.

In addition to the cultural dimensions of communication, we need to take into consideration the social parameters of the situation in which language is used. What is appropriate in one situation may not be acceptable in

another. In other words, we need to adjust the way we speak to a number of extralinguistic factors from the type of social event to the characteristics of the interlocutor (age, gender, relationship to the interlocutor) to our communicative goal. All of these factors determine the level of formality, the choice of vocabulary, the discourse strategies and the like. Sociolinguistic, pragmatic and discourse competence, in addition to linguistic competence, are therefore an integral part of communicative competence.

SPEECH ACTS

One area in which the relationship between language and culture matters most are speech acts such as invitations, compliments, complaints, greetings, apologies and the like. In this area the rules for expressing particular functions may differ substantially across cultures and speech acts may be realized as quite different surface structures in different languages. Speech acts are in fact a perfect illustration of the differences between the way we say or write something in different cultures and languages and are, at the same time, the most salient and fertile ground for misunderstandings caused by such differences.

The feature that accounts for most misunderstandings in speech acts involves the degree of directness and politeness, two closely related concepts. These vary substantially in Slovene and English and may in practice trigger numerous embarrassing situations and misunderstandings. Let us take a look at the way we express requests. These tend to be fairly direct in Slovene, but quite complex and very indirect in English. The less direct the request the more polite it sounds in English. Translated into Slovene, however, this principle does not always work. In some cases, English requests may be so direct, that when translated literally into Slovene, they are perceived as awkward or even as examples of deliberate mockery. This is especially true of certain long-winded or typically conventional, idiomatic expressions in English

that simply defy a direct transfer to Slovene. The sentence below is one example of such an indirect request:

Would you be so kind as to help me on to the train with my suitcase, please?

Each culture, therefore, has its own language-specific ways of expressing various degrees of politeness, i.e. the relationship between the degree of directness and politeness is not always clear-cut and straightforward even within a single language and is understandably far from being identical in two different ones. Slovenes usually tone down their requests by the addition of *prosim* (please) or alternatively employ interrogative rather than imperative or affirmative forms. Slovene speakers do nevertheless tend to be much more direct and less subtle than English speakers. The more direct requests made by Slovenes are likely to be perceived by English speakers as too strong, aggressive, rude or impolite – in short, inappropriate for the occasion and the purpose. As a result they might be ignored or even produce just the opposite of the intended effect.

The British and American tendency toward indirectness translates even into the sphere of non-verbal behavior, where the slightest infringement of somebody else's personal space is judged as a fairly heavy offense and certainly unacceptable. Passing relatively close to a person is normally accompanied by expressions such as *excuse me*, *pardon*, *coming through* in order to avert even the slightest suspicion that we are deliberately invading personal space. Inadvertently touching somebody would result in the same exaggerated (in Slovene eyes) use of the mentioned expressions. These are far from being as commonplace in Slovenia, which is why British or American speakers visiting Slovenia may be in for a real culture shock.

While English seems to be less direct and more polite in most cases, there are exceptions, too. Let us take greetings and introductions, for example, where Slovene speakers

tend to be very formal and respectful upon first meeting someone. Rules of politeness are carefully observed especially when there is a difference in the age and status of the interlocutors, when titles, last names and second persons pronouns in the plural are used to signal respect and distance. English speakers, especially Americans, on the other hand, seem to have no such inhibitions; they tend to be very informal and are likely to use first names immediately or switch to them very quickly even when they are not invited to do so. By being so outgoing and informal they try to create a friendly and relaxed atmosphere, but in most cases they achieve just the opposite effect. Slovene speakers see their resorting to familiarity when none is called for as impolite, presumptuous and rude. Many a potentially promising interaction may thus get off on the wrong foot due to the ignorance of cultural conventions on one or the other side.

As illustrated by the examples so far, speech acts are anything but simple to handle appropriately. In essence we need to be aware of three steps in performing them effectively. First we need to take into account their linguistic aspects and make sure that we use correct, or at least acceptable, syntactic structures and choose the appropriate lexical items. Next, we need to consider the social parameters of the interaction and choose the right register and degree of formality in accordance with the type of situation, the characteristics of the interlocutor and the communicative goal that we have in mind. And finally, there is the third step, which involves the underlying cultural values in each speech act. While the first two steps are important, they are not sufficient and speakers coming from different cultures who fail to take into account the third one may still end up with different interpretations of the same event. A good example of this is the way in which food is offered and accepted in Slovenia on the one hand, and in Britain and the United States on the other. In Slovenia it is still customary, especially among older speakers, to





reject food out of politeness the first time it is offered. The host(ess) then insists, and the guest finally accepts it after being pressed to take it several times. In Britain and in the USA, on the other hand, the rejection is taken at face value and a person rejecting food out of politeness runs a very real risk of going hungry. This kind of frustration would of course be unnecessary if the Slovene speaker realized that instead of employing a ritual of polite formulas, he or she should have simply accepted the food graciously. And vice-versa, English speakers in Slovenia might not be so frustrated when they are constantly forced to help themselves to more food if they were able to „read“ the host(ess)' insistence as an expression of mere politeness. A greater awareness of such differences, which are deeply rooted in the culture of a given society, would certainly contribute to preventing similar misinterpretations. It would also enable us to express our intentions more adequately and help us avoid the sometimes rather painful practical consequences of our lack of cultural knowledge.

■ COMPLIMENTS

A very transparent example of the different rules that apply to the use of certain speech acts in Slovene and English are compliments. These are not so very different in terms of structure as they are in the way and frequency with which they are used. In general, the British and even more so the Americans are extremely generous in giving compliments. They use them to express admiration of other people, to show support for them, to applaud their achievements and in general to create a feeling of mutual affinity and solidarity. The fact that they do so at almost every step of the way contributes to a very positive, optimistic and constructive atmosphere on a broader societal scale. Consequently, individuals feel that anything is within their reach and that they only need to apply themselves in order to achieve their goals. This is quite

contrary to the Slovene environment, where people tend to use compliments rather sparingly and often look for reasons why individuals are bad rather than praise them, or look for excuses why something cannot be done rather than adopting a more positive attitude toward life. They only give compliments when they feel that they are well deserved, in other words only for outstanding achievements. It is no wonder then that the British and American use of compliments strikes Slovenes as excessive and that, as a result, they often see native speakers of English as superficial and insincere. The problem is that they are not aware of the solidarity dimension of English compliments that contributes to better interpersonal communication and helps improve social relations. They don't see compliments in the spirit that they are given, i.e. they tend to judge them all according to factual merit rather than seeing many of them as mere expressions of benevolent politeness. The result of this discrepancy is the negative stereotyping of English native speakers by Slovenes and conversely, the inability of Slovene speakers to handle compliments appropriately and integrate themselves into a British or American environment. This is intensified by the fact that English uses compliments in a number of other functions as well. Since I have written about compliments elsewhere (Šabec, 2000) I will not go into a detailed discussion here. Suffice it to say that compliments in English serve as a very effective conversational strategy accompanying or even replacing greetings, starting and maintaining conversations, and avoiding potentially embarrassing silences and are as such very suitable for a special kind of discourse known as small talk, which one encounters at informal get-togethers. Since they are fairly cliché in nature, compliments can be used in English not only with friends and acquaintances, but also with relative strangers. In addition, compliments are used as a fitting introduction to criticism of others and to complaints. By first pointing out the positive aspects of the thing

criticized or the person to whom we are complaining we prepare the terrain for a constructive solution to the problem. Rather than alienating the interlocutors by criticizing them we manage to get them on our side so that they are willing to cooperate, improve their performance, rectify the situation and the like. Even though somewhat manipulative in nature, such compliments are therefore extremely effective, much more so than the more direct, destructive criticism or the more aggressive complaints used by Slovene speakers. These would be perceived by English speakers as too strong, since they could put the other person on the defensive and in the end would more likely than not prevent a mutually satisfying solution.

Examples:

- Praising personal appearance/ability/new acquisitions/possessions

Your hair looks just great.

Good job!

I love your new car.

- Expressing solidarity

A: *No cigarette with your coffee today? Good, you haven't given up.*

B: *Well, I'm trying. It's been hard, but that's two weeks since my last one.*

A: *Don't give up now. You've done so well so far and just think of what it's doing for your health (never mind you bank balance).*

- Toning down criticism

Your record has always been impeccable, but lately I've been hearing comments to the contrary. It would be such a shame to lose your good reputation.

- Small talk

Having a ball!

Delicious dinner.

Doesn't the house look great?



The way we respond to compliments is also important. In English, the dilemma of showing too much enthusiasm at being praised and the appearance of being too modest is usually resolved by resorting to a short and gracious thank you. It is also possible to express agreement with the compliment-giver's joy about our work, possession or ability, or we may resort to a third strategy, minimizing the worth of the thing praised and denying any credit to ourselves. While the first two strategies are extremely common in English, the third one is very rare. In Slovene, the situation is somewhat different as many people still tend to withdraw into self modesty and pretend not to deserve any credit. This strategy is likely to put English speakers offering compliments into an unpleasant, even embarrassing position. They cannot figure out why the person was not pleased with the compliment and can only interpret their behavior as a sign of false modesty (fishing for compliments) or too low self-esteem. In either case, the likelihood that they will compliment them again is small and so is the likelihood of their trying to maintain normal relations.

Examples:

- Accepting a compliment graciously

A: *Your new coat looks great.*

B: *Thanks./Thanks. It's quite stylish, isn't it?/ Thanks. I'm glad you like it.*

- Minimizing the worth of the praised object

A: *I really like your sunglasses. I've never seen you with them before – are they new?*

B: *I bought them a while ago, but I don't wear them much because I'm not sure they really suit me.*



COMPLAINTS

As pointed out, complaints in English often contain elements of compliments as well. In general, we complain when we are unhappy about a faulty product, a poorly performed service, or someone's behavior, such as making too much noise, for instance. In line with the English preference of being less direct, English complaints often strike Slovene speakers as too mild. They are usually couched in polite terms and sound almost apologetic. British and American speakers have a good reason for such a subtle approach, as they know that a more aggressive one would likely backfire casting a bad light on the person doing the complaining. By stating their complaint in polite, but firm terms and by specifying what they expect in terms of compensation they stand a much better chance of getting satisfaction. Their goal is not to simply vent their anger, but rather to remedy the situation. Non-native speakers of English, therefore, need to recognize the implicit norms of native speakers' behavior, i.e. they need to learn how to employ this relatively subtle, but highly effective strategy.

e.g. At the dry cleaner's:

Customer: I'm sorry to bother you, but I seem to have a problem with the pants you dry-cleaned for me last week.

Owner: Oh, what exactly is the problem?

Customer: Well, I've always been so happy with the items you've cleaned for me before, but it seems that this time my pants have shrunk.

Owner: Oh, I'm terribly sorry about that.

Customer: I'm sure you are, it's just that I particularly liked that pair and now they're unwearable. So, really, I think some kind of compensation would be appropriate.

Owner: Again, let me say how sorry I am. I can offer you the choice of re-

placing the pants or you could decide to use our service free of charge for the next six months.

Customer: In that case I'd prefer to take the cost of the pants.

Owner: Certainly. I hope we haven't lost you as a customer and I can assure you that the same thing will not happen again.

Customer: Thank you, I appreciate it.

INVITATIONS

The last type of speech act that I will explore at some length is the invitation. Invitations are a frequent source of misunderstandings and unnecessarily hurt feelings in intercultural communication. Just as compliments, they are extended with such frequency especially in the United States that newcomers often get the impression that they are being issued invitations all the time. The problem arises when there is no follow-up after the initial invitation. The disappointment is so much greater because of the generally very outgoing and friendly nature of Americans. Most Slovenes visiting there have a hard time understanding why the initial enthusiasm dies down and nothing comes out of most invitations. This initial disappointment naturally leads to negative judgments about the superficiality of the Americans and may result in mistrust and the cooling down of relations.

What happens in this case is the common inability of non-native speakers to distinguish between two types of invitations: vague and ambiguous ones on the one hand, and definite or unambiguous ones on the other. The former are most often given simply out of politeness, to show kindness or to acknowledge the other person, but they imply no real intention of their implementation. Even though good will is there, real commitment is not. The likelihood of following up on such invitations is low, if not nil, and they should be

taken as mere signs of politeness or affection. In a broader context, bearing in mind the very high degree of social and geographical mobility in the United States, where people work long hours and move around the country a lot, it is not unusual for people to run into each other, extend invitations, make plans to get together, but never follow up. Still, such invitations are accepted by most native speakers in the good spirit in which they are given. This, however, is not always the case with non-native speakers who often miss the clues as to the nature of such invitations and take them seriously.

One clue that should alert non-native speakers of English to the fact that such invitations are just expressions of politeness is the absence of any mention of concrete information. If there is no reference to a specific time, place or planned activity, then the invitation cannot be taken as a sign of concrete social commitment. A real, unambiguous invitation would contain precisely that. Expressions such as *definitely* and *soon* do not count as definite and are rather typical of vague invitations.

Examples:

- Vague, ambiguous invitation:

A: *It was nice meeting you, but I have to go now.*

B: *O.K., perhaps we could meet up again soon.*

A: *Yes, let's get together some time.*

- Definite, unambiguous invitation:

A: *Now that the project is well underway, why don't we go out one evening to celebrate?*

B: *Sure, why not?*

A: *How about Saturday? We could meet at the Old Mill pub at 7.*

B: *That sounds good. See you then.*

Invitations are not always black-and-white, however. Sometimes they take twists and turns and involve different degrees of negotiation. As illustrated by the following example, the first impression may be that of a sincere invitation, but the next steps turn out to be less promising and the lead ends in non-commitment.



- Unsuccessful negotiation of social commitment

Sarah: *Oh, hi! I haven't seen you for such a long time. How are you?*

Jane: *Fine, but just very busy these days.*

Sarah: *I thought you must have been because you haven't called. We really have to get together sometime.*

Jane: *I know, I know. How about this weekend?*

Sarah: *This weekend – no, I can't, we've already planned to visit my mother. How about the weekend after?*

Jane: *No, impossible. I've got a business trip to the States, but we should really get together.*

Sarah: *I tell you what, why don't you call me when you're back from the States and we'll arrange something then.*

Jane: *Good idea. I promise to call you as soon as I get back.*

Sarah: *Yes, do! Don't forget!*

Jane: *No, I won't. I promise.*

Native speakers are very adept at detecting the real nature of invitations and in most cases know intuitively which ones are meant seriously. Non-native speakers, on the other hand, are not as good at that and need to be given explicit instructions as to how to distinguish between the two types. This is important not only because it may spare them the grief of needlessly waiting for someone to call, but



also because it may help them react to invitations in a more selective and appropriate manner. In the absence of the relevant cultural knowledge, a Slovene speaker may react to a vague, unrealized invitation with disappointment and be consequently perceived as sulky and anti-social, which will most likely result in his never being invited again. In the opposite case, the same person who extended an invitation out of politeness, even though he or she didn't have the time, might invite him or her another time. Reacting appropriately to different kinds of invitations is therefore in the interest of maintaining long-term interpersonal communication. Also, it prevents us from forming unfounded negative judgments about native speakers of English, and vice-versa, it gives English speakers a chance to get to know Slovenes rather than stopping at the first obstacle and dismissing them as miserable and anti-social.

CONCLUSION

The few speech acts that I have discussed in this article are by no means meant to be an exhaustive account of intercultural differences between English and Slovene. They were used for illustration purposes only and in a very sketchy way, too, as addressing all speech acts and all of their aspects would not only exceed the scope of this article, but would also be quite impossible in light of the complexities of the two languages. The discussion of their selected aspects, however, has no doubt revealed the importance of intercultural knowledge for successful communication. As illustrated, the lack of such knowledge often leads to the deterioration of contact or even complete communication breakdown between members of different cultures. Providing students with relevant information about the cultural norms and conventions that pertain to a particular environment can save them many a trouble and at the same time enrich their general knowledge. Such information helps broaden students' horizons and raises the level of

their intercultural awareness. It makes them more sensitive and encourages them to become more tolerant and accepting of otherness. The emphasis is on what ties different people together rather than on what separates them, which is why they gradually begin to see intercultural communication as a kind of a bridge rather than as a barrier between different people. This realization often arouses their curiosity and motivates them to explore and learn on their own and in more creative ways than they would have done otherwise.

Presenting cultural information is by no means an easy task. Not only is pinpointing it precisely a real challenge compared to more discrete linguistic rules, but culture is also susceptible to various changes. This is particularly true of Britain and the United States, which are highly multicultural societies and often lack single standards that would be valid for everybody. This makes it more difficult for a teacher to capture the totality of social and cultural dimensions of life there. In addition, our own culture has undergone very rapid and substantial changes in the past decade. What seemed strange to some Slovenes ten years ago, may seem quite normal and familiar to a young teenager of today. Globalization and the ever-present use of English as lingua franca have had their effect, especially on the young. All of this should be taken into account when teaching intercultural competence. If we take it in the right spirit, we can see it as an advantage and start to become more open toward the outer world and, at the same time, develop a greater appreciation of our own identity (in terms of what we have to offer) and a higher level of self-confidence.

Integrating culture into English language teaching therefore does matter. The arguments in its favor are strong, and it "is now generally accepted that language learning is more fruitful when accompanied by some kind of ...cultural awareness activities" (Hawkins, 1988; Byram and Morgan 1995). Without such activities, language learning would be much harder and the language learned out of con-

text a rather awkward, lame tool which could occasionally work, but would more often than not let us down. In as far as our goal is successful communication, such language tea-

ching would be in fact completely inadequate. In other words, culture is an integral part of any language teaching and should be given its proper place within it.



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ZAŠTO JE VAŽNA KULTURA PRI PODUČAVANJU ENGLESKOG JEZIKA?

Sažetak

U ovom se članku raspravlja o integriranju kulturološkog znanja pri podučavanju engleskog jezika. Kultura se predstavlja kao integralni dio jezika, koja u mnogim slučajevima utječe na način kako percipiramo stvarnost. Te percepcije mogu se razlikovati djelomice ili potpuno u raznim kulturama, i zato su u međukulturološkoj komunikaciji česti nesporazumi. Područje na kojemu su takvi problemi izraziti i uobičajeni jesu govorni činovi. Da bismo upozorili na probleme s kojima se susreću govornici stranog jezika, u ovom članku dajemo primjere upotrebe komplimenata, poziva ili tužbi u engleskom i slovenskom jeziku. Zaključak je da je razvijanje kulturološke kompetencije bitno da bi podučavanje engleskog jezika bilo uspješno i da takvo podučavanje ne samo da pomaže studentima bolje i svrsihodnije komunicirati, nego im bitno podiže razinu tolerancije prema drugima i pomaže razviti interkulturalnu svijest.

Ključne riječi: slovenski jezik, engleski jezik, međukulturalna komunikacija, govorni činovi