

# How Deep Should We Go? The Role of Deep Culture in the EFL Classroom

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## [Abstract]

The use of culture in foreign language learning is now very common to the point that it is expected in textbooks and lectures, not merely to supplement the language component but also to compliment it. H. Douglas Brown remarks, "A language is a part of a culture and a culture is part of a language; the two are intricately interwoven so that one can not separate the two without losing the significance of either language or culture."<sup>1</sup> Cultural components are often used to introduce new vocabulary and grammar, as an aside to explain certain language formations, or the subject of reading passages concerning cultural norms in the target language that may be sufficiently different from or completely new to those known by the language student. As Amanda D. Hilliard notes, "Rather than focus solely on teaching the mechanics of language, it is now being suggested that language teaching should incorporate more activities for cultural awareness..."<sup>2</sup> However, culture does not simply take on one form. The concept of *deep culture*, which covers the traditions, beliefs and values of a society as opposed to the *surface level culture* of observable behaviours or *intermediate level culture* of symbols and meanings is very much a part of any society. However, how does this deep level culture translate into foreign language education? How far should we go in language instruction relating to culture? Is it better to leave deep and intermediate level culture to personal experience of visiting and living in the target culture, or should it be introduced in language classrooms in the learners' home environment? This paper will explore the meanings of different levels of cultural understanding and the question of introducing intermediate and

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<sup>1</sup> Brown, 165

<sup>2</sup> Hilliard, 238

deep level cultural norms in language courses taught outside the target culture, specifically in the case of EFL.

## **Defining the Different Levels of Culture**

The concept of different levels of culture is often depicted as an image of an iceberg (see Figure 1). The top of the iceberg, that which can be seen clearly above the water, represents surface culture. Surface culture can be observed easily, and is occasionally referred to as Culture (with a capital 'C'), including fine arts, literature, drama, classical music and popular music, and other visible aspects such as popular games, cooking or forms of dress.<sup>3</sup> While these items do not overwhelmingly define a culture, they are easily noticeable and understood, and are often used as examples of foreign cultures in textbooks. Students studying British culture may be presented with reading passages from famous authors such as Charles Dickens or Emily Brontë, study the lyrics to songs by The Beatles, or look at pictures of traditional Scottish kilts. There can be no denying that such studies can offer genuine insights into a target culture, but what they also indirectly reveal are deeper aspects of that culture that are taught less directly. As we go below the waterline, to continue to iceberg analogy, we come to parts of the target culture that are no less real, but much less obvious. Items such as notions of modesty, conceptions of beauty, or relationships between classes, lie just below the surface. The deeper we go, the more abstract the concepts become: conceptions of cleanliness, approaches to problem solving, decision making processes, social interaction, notions of logic, and facial expressions to name but a few.<sup>4</sup>

The iceberg metaphor of culture distinguishes between surface and deep culture.

Deep culture is mostly hidden and comprises the aspects of identity that most powerfully affect our self-concept, perceptions and interactions with others. It is the many subtleties of deep culture that we must respond to with acceptance and sensitivity in our classrooms and hallways.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Edmonton Public Schools, 2

<sup>4</sup> Edmonton Public Schools, 2

<sup>5</sup> Edmonton Public Schools, 2

As we all aware with icebergs, the largest part lies under the surface, and it is the deeper aspects of culture that form the larger foundations that support the parts which can be observed.

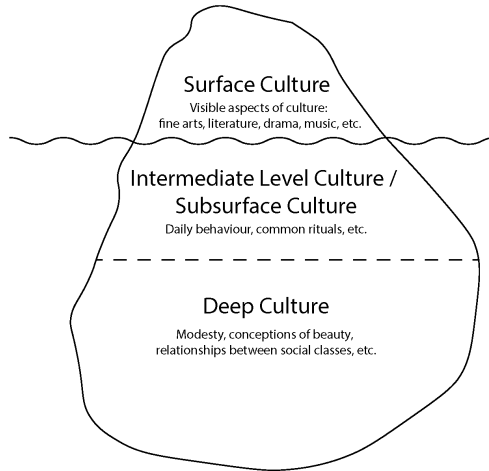


Figure 1: The Iceberg of Culture

E.H. Schein defines the three levels of culture as Artifacts, Espoused Beliefs and Values, and Basic Underlying Assumptions. His three divisions align well with the previous surface, intermediate and deep culture model. Artifacts, he says, are:

...the architecture of its physical environment; its language; its technology and products; its artistic creations; its style as embodied in clothing, manners of address, and emotional displays; its myths and stories told about the organization; its published lists of values; and its observable rituals and ceremonies.<sup>6</sup>

He uses Egyptian and Mayan pyramids as an example of how artefacts of a culture and deeper meaning are separated: both types of pyramid are very visible artefacts of their culture, but they have different deep culture purposes, the former being tombs and the latter temples. In other words, he goes on, “observers can describe what they see and feel but cannot reconstruct from that alone what those things mean in the given group.”<sup>7</sup> To understand that next level, you have to delve deeper in

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<sup>6</sup> Schein, 23

your understanding of the culture in question. However, he warns, “to try to infer the deeper assumptions from artifacts alone because a person’s interpretations will inevitably be projections of his or her own feelings and reactions.”<sup>8</sup> This raises an interesting and important point in regard to students of foreign languages: if a cultural point is superficially mentioned in a textbook, or given little or no context, a student would apply their own cultural rules and beliefs in the place of the correct reasons in an attempt to understand them. For example, a Japanese student reads in her textbook that American teachers often sit on their desks while teaching, possibly drinking coffee at the same time, and the students in the class interrupt each other when having a class discussion. Applying her own Japanese standards to this situation would result in her believing the teacher and the students are very rude and disrespectful to one another as this behaviour would be almost unheard of and looked down upon in Japan.

The next level according to Schein is Espoused Beliefs and Values. Schein says that “Espoused beliefs and values often leave large areas of behavior unexplained, leaving us with a feeling that we understand a piece of the culture but still do not have the culture as such in hand.”<sup>9</sup> By this, he means that sometimes what is observed in a culture and what is believed by those participating in those actions is at odds and can appear contradictory. He uses a business model to explain this situation in that a company may say that its goal is teamwork, and yet reward individual competitiveness. He also says that these values are “confirmed only by the shared social experience of a group”<sup>10</sup> inasmuch that an outsider to that group may not fully understand or appreciate that which is taken as normal by group members. The application of this for language instruction would be that as an outsider to the speakers of a target language, the student may feel unable to comprehend why actions are performed in a way that is not always clear to them. Why, for instance, would a British person apologise for an action they did not commit, such as when a person has their foot stepped on they then apologise to the person who did the stepping?

Schein’s third level in is Basic Underlying Assumptions. These assumptions, he states, “have become so taken for granted that you find

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<sup>7</sup> Schein, 24

<sup>8</sup> Schein, 25

<sup>9</sup> Schein, 27

<sup>10</sup> Schein, 26

little variation within a social unit...(they) tend to be nonconfrontable and nondebatable, and hence are extremely difficult to change”.<sup>11</sup> He uses the following situation as an example:

If we assume, on the basis of past experience or education, that other people will take advantage of us whenever they have an opportunity, we expect to be taken advantage of, and we then interpret the behavior of others in a way that coincides with those expectations. We observe people sitting in a seemingly idle posture at their desk and interpret their behavior as “loafing” rather than “thinking out an important problem.” We perceive absence from work as “shirking” rather than “doing work at home.”

If this is not only a personal assumption but also one that is shared and thus part of the culture of an organization, we will discuss with others what to do about our “lazy” workforce and institute tight controls to ensure that people are at their desks and busy.<sup>12</sup>

While Schein’s example takes place in a work environment, it could easily be applied to a large enough cross-section of a society where most people would agree with the same basic assumptions. These assumptions that are taken for granted by a culture would be very confusing to student of that culture’s language as they tend to be implicit. The British tradition of queuing, for example, is so ingrained in the British character that to not queue is considered by most British to be highly offensive. Queuing has been ranked as one of the main things about British culture that foreign students often do not understand about the U.K.,<sup>13</sup> not necessarily because the concept is hard to grasp but the absolute seriousness with which it is taken is baffling. Many times, the people in the target culture having learned a behaviour through imitation rather than education, may not be able to justify their actions either, simply offering an apologetic, “that’s just the way it’s done here” by means of an explanation.

Another way of viewing culture which implies the concepts of surface and deep culture is the 3 Ps, which “can be expressed through the image of a triangle with “Perspectives” at the top and “Products” and “Practices” forming the base, showing how the products and practices

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<sup>11</sup> Schein, 28

<sup>12</sup> Schein, 29

<sup>13</sup> Wood

are derived from the perspectives that form the worldview of a cultural group. This image also demonstrates the fact that these three components of culture are closely related”.<sup>14</sup> (See Figure 2)

Jerrold Frank ties together the 3 P concept and the iceberg concept. Products, he states, are the equivalent of surface culture, things we can “see, touch, taste, or hear”, while the practices and perspectives are the deep culture aspect.<sup>15</sup> Cutshall compliments this view, labelling *products* as “Items required or justified by the underlying beliefs and values of that culture”, such as books, laws, foods and so on, *practices* as “Patterns of social interactions or behaviors accepted by a society”, such as use of space, rites of passage and social discourse, and *perspectives* as “that culture’s view of the world” including attitudes and values.<sup>16</sup> Each division is dependant upon the other, and this is where potential trouble can be found for those studying a foreign language.

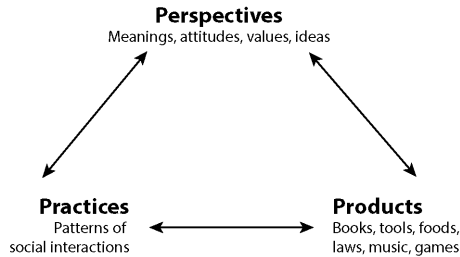


Figure 2: The 3 Ps (after Cutshall, 33)

## The Teaching of Culture

One question that is very relevant is the timing involved in teaching culture. It has been suggested that perhaps the direct teaching of culture should be put off until a student has a firmer grasp of the fundamentals of the language they are learning. Once the essential vocabulary and grammar have been internalised, a student would be better equipped to deal with cultural differences. However, it is the opinion of others that “it is a major mistake for teachers to hold off cultural topics” as the two are inseparable and “culture is a gateway to language”.<sup>17</sup>

As we delve deeper into teaching culture, we must also consider

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<sup>14</sup> Cutshall, 32-33

<sup>15</sup> Frank, 3

<sup>16</sup> Cutshall, 33

<sup>17</sup> Cutshall, 34

what to include in textbooks. In a review of cultural materials found in ELT textbooks, Amanda Hilliard concluded the cultural components presented “simplistic conceptualizations” and publishers need to include “more in-depth cultural materials which include some explanation of cultural practices and traditions and...different viewpoints so that students do not assume that culture is a monolithic institution applicable to all members of a society”. She goes on to say textbooks portray culture from a “tourist” perspective, giving an overly positive viewpoint, and that students need to be presented with a more balanced view of positive and negative aspects in order to gain a more “genuine view of other cultures”.<sup>18</sup> While most cultural components of textbooks attempt to show the target culture in a positive light, unpleasant or negative views may also negatively affect language studies. However, the idea that all sides of a culture should be represented as long as it is balanced well and is not off-putting to the learner has merit.

Deeper levels of culture offer unique challenges to both the student and the teacher. The underlying reasons for many of the things which learners study that are related to deep culture will cause questions, but without knowing the context of the appropriate level of deeper cultural understanding, would a student be prepared to appreciate the answer? As a teacher, problems arise when one has to decide when or if an aspect of deeper culture should or should not be taught. Sometimes it is better to gloss over an item than unnecessarily overcomplicate matters. If one were to introduce Guy Fawkes Night in a conversation exercise, would it not be better to leave explanations at the surface level culture of fireworks and bonfires, rather than go into the deeper concepts of the persecution of Catholics during the reign of James I?

### **ESL vs EFL and Deep Culture**

Culture below surface level concerns items that cannot be readily observed and understood, and as such often appear through social interaction within that target culture. Stephen B. Ryan recounts experiences as a teacher living in Japan to illustrate cultural differences. As an example of intermediate culture, he observed that at the beginning of a sumo match the wrestlers throw a white substance into the ring. Knowing how prevalent rice is in Japanese culture, he

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<sup>18</sup> Hilliard, 246

erroneously believed that it was rice that was being thrown. However, he later discovered that it was in fact salt being used in a pre-match purifying ritual. In this case, the cultural relevance was not immediately obvious, even though the actions of the wrestlers were. Ryan continues by discussing a time he met an old student by chance and smiling, tried to strike up a conversation with her. Her answer was brief, simply saying “chotto”, after which she quickly moved on. He later learned that “chotto” in this context was used as a polite excuse for not being able to talk with her old teacher as she was very busy, but did not want to offend him. He notes that the experience taught him his American values which make it impolite to not make conversation upon meeting someone he knew were incompatible with certain Japanese concepts of politeness. Deep culture also explains the lack of feedback from Japanese students which are commonly interpreted as “indifference, incomprehension or dislike” by teachers from more open backgrounds. This is a display of Japanese deep cultural value of “social hierarchy which exhibits the norm of silence and hierarchical communication style”.<sup>19</sup>

Students of English studying in the United States, the United Kingdom, Ireland, Australia, New Zealand, or Canada will likewise learn cultural points that will aid in their understanding of the English language not only in the classroom, but every time they step outside, go shopping, or attend social events. Much like the language they are learning, the culture of the country they live in will also be absorbed. EFL students, on the other hand, will not have this advantage.

How can students studying English outside the countries where it is spoken be exposed to deeper cultural explanations? They are to a certain degree already being exposed to deep culture concepts as they study. Language textbooks almost always contain cultural content, even if it is frequently superficial. However, the question should also be, does she actually *need* to learn the deeper cultural ramifications? While it may be next to impossible to detangle language from culture, it is possible to become linguistically proficient without having also being familiar with deeper cultural concepts. Even ESL students may not be fully aware of the culture they are living in and the effects it has upon the language they are learning. Many deeper items may be subconsciously internalised by students studying abroad that they are

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<sup>19</sup> Ryan, 74-75



not even aware of. The main disadvantage for EFL students would be although with sufficient practice they may become proficient in the speaking, listening, reading, and writing aspects of language learning, they would largely lack the cultural background to appreciate the finer intricacies of that language.

So what should be done from the teacher's point of view? How far should we be concerned with bringing culture into the classroom? Surface level culture is easy enough to teach; national costumes, festivals, national dishes and so on can be shown with illustrations or physical props, and examples of literature can be read or presented to a class. Deeper levels of culture cannot. Deeper culture generally must be explained or experienced first-hand, and those ideas which are closest to the culture of the student will be the easiest for them to grasp. Other deep cultural concepts, as we have seen, are more prone to misunderstanding as the student may substitute cultural ideas from her own background and misinterpret the target culture's intentions. Students interrupting a teacher or classmate in order to debate a point in an American classroom may often be acceptable behaviour, but if a Japanese student is not aware of that part of American deep culture, she may consider it very rude or insulting to the person who was talking. I have occasionally witnessed this in students who have returned from a prolonged study abroad period and have adapted some of the deep cultural characteristics they experienced in the United States. The result is those students will occasionally wait for their classmates to answer a question, meet only silence, and tend to dominate classroom discussion after substituting their Japanese deep cultural belief of quiet respect with American values of abhorring silence in a conversation. However, can this behaviour be taught? EFL students can certainly be made aware of this difference, but by not being exposed to it in a culture that exhibits that behaviour, it still goes against their deep cultural instincts and they will be less likely to adopt that behaviour. Perhaps the best an instructor in those circumstances can do is to make students aware of deep culture items when appropriate. Without reinforcement from their surroundings such as that which an ESL student encounters on a daily basis, EFL students are unlikely to change their behaviour, and nor should they, but it may lessen the shock and lead to better understanding should they find themselves in a culture where such behaviour is normal.

## Conclusion

Jerome Hanley writes, “the journey toward cultural competence is both lifelong and painful”.<sup>20</sup> This is of course also true for learners of other languages. Cultural understanding must accompany the student on the journey to mastering a different language. Hanley goes on to say,

Cultural competence is not achieved through words alone, but rather through knowledge and the application of that knowledge... You also learn about other cultures through books, movies, workshops, and, most important, through firsthand contact. Direct experience can lead to the deep knowledge that results in behaviour change. One must experience culture directly and on many occasions to acquire its secrets.<sup>21</sup>

In this respect, the EFL student is at a definite disadvantage to her ESL counterpart as she cannot hope to experience first-hand many of the cultural concepts the ESL student will be exposed to. It is here that EFL teachers have to try their best to fill in the gaps, and just as importantly, know when to tap into deeper cultural explanations and when to leave justifications on a surface level.

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<sup>20</sup> Hanley, 9

<sup>21</sup> Hanley, 10, 12

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