

Language learning and cultural awareness

Culture belongs to language teaching. When learning about English speaking countries students come across cultural differences. They can compare their home country and the country they are learning about.

Teaching about English speaking countries helps students to understand better the cultural background of people living in other countries and it makes them prepared for their future communication. Intercultural learning with the focus on the basic facts about English speaking countries can enrich the class and supply the lesson programme with fresh materials. Students may get acquainted with possible troubles in the cross-cultural communication and thanks to the knowledge they may avoid possible misunderstanding in future.

The term “culture” means a lot. It consists of artefacts, actions, behaviours, knowledge and many more items. There are several aspects of culture: products, practices, communities, persons and also perspectives. We should have this in mind when thinking about cultural awareness. *Products* of the culture cover the physical settings, the artefacts, the social institutions, and the art forms. *Practices* include different actions of the English-speaking people. It means we are interested in what people say, do, how they behave. When we talk about *communities* they are in, we want students to know different *people*, representatives of groups of people, their customs and life styles. *Perspectives* represent people’s beliefs, values and attitudes that underline the products and that guide persons and communities in the practices of the culture.

The teacher chooses the countries which culture he wants the students to talk about in the lesson. English speaking countries will be spoken about, of course. Does this mean the countries where English is an official language? Taking this into account we would not be able to talk about the USA. Did you know that in the USA English is not an official language at a federal level? Each state (part of the USA) has its own official language. Some of them use English as their official language. English is a Lingua Franca of the whole world. In theory we could talk about any country in the world. Anyway, the teacher mostly talks about GB, the USA, Australia, and maybe New Zealand or Canada and their cultures.

The teacher may use the following materials:

1. Audio: radio broadcast, songs, telephone call, interview, etc.
2. Video: music videos, advertisements, films, talk shows, news, etc.
3. Texts: newspapers, magazines, websites, sport rules, laws, customs declaration, business or personal letters, e-mails, text messages, menus, etc.
4. Leaflets: info, theatre or cinema programmes, tickets (public transport, theatre, exhibitions, concerts) etc.
5. Tools of daily use: manuals, instructions, recipes, leaflets enclosed with a medicine, invitation cards, payment order, etc.
6. Advertisements: in TV programmes, magazines, newspapers, billboards, etc.
7. Literature: novels (extracts), short stories, travel guides, etc.

Authentic material sometimes works best. It can be used with different tasks for students, such as looking for specific information, answering comprehension questions, guessing the meaning from the context (inference), speaking practice (imitating conversation, telephone call, making an offer, description), writing (reply to a letter, e-mail, advertisement), etc.

The materials used, will of course, depend on the usual factors:

topic

target language area

skills

students’ needs and interests.

The more experience of students' own the better. Students can speak about how they like food, how people look like, they can bring their experiences from travelling, etc. To be systematic plays a subordinate role. We should not aim towards complete knowledge. Personal interest of the learners in a specific area and their decision for the topic are more important. The teacher can use motivating questions at the beginning, e.g. "Do you know any English songs?" "Have you ever eaten an English pudding?" Thanks to teaching culture we introduce other subjects into our lessons. They might be geography, history, biology, social science, politics ... We talk about integration. When the subject plus the language are really taught together, we talk about CLIL (Content and Language Integrated Learning).

Following are examples of topics (dealing with the USA) enabling the teacher to bring culture awareness into the lesson:

The USA – the melting pot society
Spanish and Mexican influences in many parts of the USA
Blacks in America
Native Americans
Religion in America
Women in America
American costumes
The American character (stereotypes, myths, various types)
Big cities vs. small towns (ways and attitudes)
Pop culture (poetry, abstract painting – Andy Warhol: "Campbell Soup Can"), rock music, disco music)
American attitudes (toward themselves, toward the world)
How are Americans viewed in other countries?

Literature offers a special area of culture. It is a valuable way of learning about culture. It can help students to master the vocabulary, grammar and even pronunciation when read aloud or dramatized. It gives nice chance to practice all four skills. It provides exposure to the culture, brings aesthetic and intellectual impression. Using literature in the lessons may help the teacher to motivate students to want to read. It brings students into the world it depicts, involving him/her with its characters, plot and themes.

The traditional studying of literature in a chronological way has fortunately been abandoned nowadays. Today literature study is integrated with

- 1 mastery of language
- 2 further development of the language skills
- 3 understanding of British, American and other English speaking cultures.

English is not a national language of one particular country, but of more distinctive countries. Therefore, the term "the English Speaking Countries" is being used. That is why teachers do not speak just about the United Kingdom in the class, but other countries should be talked about, too. Each of these countries has their own culture; which should be highlighted. Although they have some common features, like the common language, they have their own characteristics, which make them unique. Learners should be aware of them, which is the main goal of teaching culture in English lessons. In fact it is not only cultural awareness but also multicultural awareness what we are heading for.