

## **“Teaching Culture in Adult ESL: Pedagogical and Ethical Consideration” by David Johnson, 2005, 9 (1) TESL-EJ**

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### **Abstract**

*This is an analysis of the article "Teaching Culture in Adult ESL: Pedagogical and Ethical Considerations" by David Johnson (2005). Using the literature review and the author's three-decade-long experience as an English instructor, this analysis aims to shed light on several issues from the writer's perspective regarding the relationship between language and culture, such as the inclusion of the target culture to assist ESL learners in understanding the structures and lexicons of the language. The main result of the critical article is that including culture in teaching English is unavoidable because intercultural communicative competence not only helps students to communicate effectively but also helps them to be knowledgeable and recognizable to the world around them. Including the target culture does not mean being dominant or powerful; it means showing values, beliefs, and concepts that help them communicate and interact competently and proficiently. One of the most interesting topics that improve ESL learning is talking about cultures, such as kinds of food, clothes, and different values and beliefs, and comparing them with the mother culture without offending or insulting anyone.*

**Keywords:** pedagogy, culture, implications, communication, observation.

### **Introduction**

The essay titled "Teaching Culture in Adult ESL: Pedagogical and Ethical Considerations" by David Johnson explores the pedagogical and ethical implications of incorporating cultural instruction in adult English as a Second Language (ESL) education. This critical work aims to illuminate several topics that were addressed in the aforementioned article, drawing upon the literature review as well as the reaction paper's author's extensive experience as an English instructor spanning over three decades. The objective of this analysis is to provide insights, based on the writer's viewpoint, on several aspects concerning the relationship between language and culture.

### **Body**

David begins his article by claiming that "adult ESL learners understand that language learning consists of more than the ability to understand new linguistic structures" (p. 1). He means that to understand the English language successfully, ESL students should study not only its structures but also its culture. Some researchers, such as Brown (2000), Jiang (2000), and Peterson and Coltran (2003), see language and culture as inextricably

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linked. As a result, teaching English and its culture cannot be separated because culture is considered a necessary context for language use.

The writer has agreed with some researchers, such as Auerbach (1993) and Phillipson (1992), that American and British cultures are portrayed as dominant, hegemonic, and superior to the cultures of ESL learners so that the teaching of culture should not be overlooked. In order to evaluate whether the writer's opinion towards the dominance of American and British cultures in the culture of ESL is correct, it is important to know that studying the English culture includes all information that is related to the American and British ways of living, such as how they eat, drink, walk, dress, and so on. So, some cultural content is not relevant to studying English. Cook (1983) has mentioned that some ESL learners aren't interested in American and British cultures or don't like them.

Moreover, the writer believes that if ESL learners perceive the target culture positively as similar to their native culture, their L2 language will be improved effectively and proficiently. On the contrary, if they think that the target culture is competitive with their native culture, their L2 language will be hindered badly. This point may lead us to the importance of culture in language teaching. In other words, there is a strong relationship between the language and the culture. Peterson and Coltrane (2003) have mentioned that "students cannot truly master the language until they have also mastered the cultural contexts in which the language occurs" (p. They have stressed that for ESL learners to communicate successfully, they have to associate with appropriate cultural behavior. Sapir (1921) discussed the importance of studying vocabulary to know the physical and social environment in which people live. In other words, he stated that all human experience is mediated through culture and language. Therefore, there is a clear relationship between the language and the culture of people. For example, if ESL learners want to study the English language, they also have to study the culture of the English people to understand where and when they use the language, and vice versa.

Even though the writer's viewpoint on the relationship between language and culture is correct, two weak versions need to be properly analyzed. The first issue is that language and culture are not always taken into account. The reason for this is that culture evolves faster than language. Another erroneous assumption is that being excellent and fluent in a language does not imply familiarity with its culture. According to Hoffman (1991), "Proficiency in a language doesn't necessarily mean knowledge of the language's culture, and vice versa." Many EFL students learn English through the Internet and become fluent in the target language without ever going overseas or even reading about English culture.

Furthermore, the author has stated that "teaching English requires a program or instructor to typically choose a particular language model (American, British, Indian, etc.)". Some teachers believe that some aspects of the target cultures should be presented while others should be excluded. Because they believe that teaching English culture involves exclusionary actions that may be viewed as hegemonic, they want to integrate culture into both their English language instruction and curriculum without discussing hegemony. Because academic research and practical experience are insufficient for teaching culture to ESL learners, they may select cultural issues that interest them while ignoring others that do not. On the contrary, they may be unaware that some cultural courses can assist ESL learners in quickly acquiring the English language. In the words of the author, "Students often see cultural lessons not as impositions and thus hegemonic, but rather as a set of guidelines that help them use English in real-world and culturally imbued contexts".

The writer conducted a qualitative study at Solid ESL School for Adults in the United States to investigate the pedagogical and ethical components of teaching culture. This study's subjects include 150 male and female students. The school is diverse, having students from various countries and backgrounds, including Korean, Chinese, and Latin American students. There are various courses and modules available that help students

not only improve their English but also learn about American culture, such as how to make friends and converse with others. Furthermore, because the author wishes to explore both teachers' and students' opinions of teaching culture for ESL adult learners, he has chosen ethnography as his research technique, which aids in understanding the rationale behind teaching decisions. The writer gathered and evaluated his data in order to obtain what he refers to as "rich points" that will assist him in understanding and describing the behaviors and customs of the educational environment. He obtained an exact and correct description of Solid Oaks since he obtained his information from the teachers, who have spent a significant amount of time teaching at the school and have some control over the students' surroundings and society. These teachers used to contribute to the development of the school's curriculum. So, he has gathered a wealth of knowledge by interviewing them in order to go further into the facts that can provide him with a clear understanding of the surroundings. The author was confronted with two challenging concerns that must be investigated: how do instructors teach culture? And how do they choose which aspects of culture to teach? Because he wants precise information for his study, he has gathered data not only through interviews but also through observation and document analysis. He intends to study and understand the feelings and experiences of his interviewees about teaching American culture by using the interview approach.

Moreover, the author feels that actions and behaviors offer more unexpected information than interviews; thus, he conducted fifteen classroom observations to see whether the school's society reacts positively or negatively to teaching American culture. Observation is seen as a complementary approach that should be used. According to Bryman (2004), "structured observation is a technique in which the researcher employs explicitly formulated rules for the observation and recording of behavior, and one of its advantages is that it allows behavior to be observed directly" (p. 167). This means that it reveals elements that cannot be revealed through other means by providing some unique data on how people react to and perceive anything that happens to them.

Regarding the findings and results of the writer's study, he has noticed that even though one of the school's founders believes that teaching new arrival students the culture will help them to orient themselves with U.S. customs, teachers don't include it as a topic of discussion because the school's policy affects classroom and curricular decisions. Teachers believe that any part of American culture is essential because each one will help students be able to communicate and interact in English. Holliday (1994) has mentioned that "knowledge of how culture works generally can reveal much about the workings of classroom interaction" (P. 23).

Even though the writer has mentioned that teaching culture helps students to communicate competently, he did not indicate an academic term called "intercultural communicative competence." This concept is, as Sercu (2002) has mentioned, "the view of society with intercultural differences and the relationship to others, no matter whether it is different from a national, ethnic, social, regional, professional, or instructional point of view" (p. 62). Intercultural communicative competence not only helps students to communicate effectively but also helps them to be knowledgeable and recognizable to the world around them. This type of competence is concerned with an understanding of the social context in which language is used, the function of the interaction that the learners employ, and the information they share. Applying intercultural communicative activities involves a major change in teaching habits, which doesn't mean the proficiency of the student to speak, write, read, listen, and understand in English; it means the ability of the student to use English as a survival language.

Furthermore, the writer has found the different perceptions of teachers towards addressing the culture in the classroom. There are ten teachers interviewed, and their comments are divided between the older and the younger teachers. He has noticed that the older teachers think that teaching culture for ESL students is essential, whereas the

younger teachers are conservative towards this issue because they claim that focusing on American culture may make the ESL learners reject and hate it completely. Some others think that talking about American culture may let the students think that it is competitive and better than their own culture. ESL learners who normally study in the UK or USA may need to know about the foreign culture more than those who study in their country.

Moreover, the writer has completed the fifteen observations of the younger teachers, older teachers, and students, and he has proved that their actions and behaviors gave clearer answers to their attitudes and perceptions than interviews. He has noticed that by observing their actions and reactions during teaching and learning the culture inside the classrooms. Even though some teachers in the classroom talked about some religious matters, such as Cathedral Mass during Christian time, that ESL learners normally are not Christians, they did not show any rejection or offense, but some students have asked some interesting questions regarding this issue.

In addition, the writer has indicated an important issue that needs to be discussed in some detail. This issue of using the native language of ESL inside the classroom can be divided into two groups of people. The first group is the older teachers who believe that using the mother tongue in the ESL classroom will affect their language acquisition, whereas the other group is the younger teachers who think that using the first language sometimes can help ESL learners keep communicating in the English language. So, the first group thinks that ESL learners can be successful in L2 acquisition when they keep it separate from L1. Cook (2001) said that if L1 is the main cause of problems in learning L2, then we should eliminate it as much as possible. He has also added that most teaching methods since the 1880s have adopted the direct method instead of L1. On the other hand, the second group thinks that using only a few words in L1 can help ESL communicate, especially if one wants to explain some words to another classmate in their mother tongue.

The writer concludes his results and articles with some facts. Firstly, because the younger teachers at Solid Oaks School used to study in some communities that don't prefer talking about cultures, they are against including topics of American culture while teaching English. However, they teach culture implicitly or respond to students' questions. So, including culture in teaching English is unavoidable and necessary. The writer has noticed this fact by observing their actions and behaviors while teaching English inside the classroom. Secondly, even though the older teachers are teaching American cultures inside the classrooms of the ESL learners, they don't intend to show them as dominant or powerful. They talk about some values, beliefs, and concepts that help them communicate and interact competently and proficiently. Thirdly, regarding one of the difficult questions that the writer asks before applying his study, "How do teachers decide what aspects of culture they should choose?" he has perceived that they try to know what activities students may need in order to improve their language effectively. However, he has recommended all teachers be careful not to offend the students' values, beliefs, or concepts, especially if they want to compare one culture with another. The final point that the writer has concluded is that he has observed both teachers and students forgetting that they are studying a language when they talk about some cultural issues that make them more active and interested.

## Conclusion

The link between language and culture, such as including the target culture to assist ESL learners in understanding the language's structures and lexicons, is critical. The most interesting topics that improve ESL learning are talking about target cultures, such as kinds of food, clothes, and different values and beliefs, and comparing them with my own culture without offending or insulting anyone. The primary finding of the critical paper suggests that the incorporation of culture into English instruction is an inevitable necessity. This is due to the fact that intercultural communicative competence not only

facilitates efficient communication among students but also enhances their understanding and recognition of the global environment. Incorporating the target culture entails the demonstration of values, ideas, and concepts that facilitate effective and skilled communication and interaction.

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