

CROSS CULTURAL PROBLEMS IN TEACHING ENGLISH AND INDIVIDUALISM

When we learn a language we cannot help but learn the culture of that language because the two have evolved together and are based on one another, much like the answer to the chicken or egg coming first quandary. Discussed in this article are some cross-cultural problems associated with teaching English and individualistic culture in the parts of the world where individualism is not the base culture. Outlined is the spread of the individualistic culture of English in this epoch of globalization via the Anglo-American empires. Recounted are the problems in teaching English and individualistic culture in the areas of the world where collectivist culture is predominant, such as Japan, Vietnam, Laos, Angola, Brazil, Poland, and Ukraine, in which the author worked as a teacher of English. Being himself a representative of two cultures, Confucian by birth and Western by education, the author came to the conclusion that until the spirit of individualism is taught and practiced in the countries with collectivist culture, true competency in the English language and culture in such countries will not be achieved.

Ukraine has a European pagan cultural base and a Christian and recent Communist overlay. From its Christian and Communist past, students seem to show the general pattern of formality and fear in this formerly collectivist society. To overcome these problems, the author intends to use the techniques of getting students to sing English songs and introduce them to the great literature and films about individualism. These methods worked extremely well in reducing students' fears and formalness with English in the countries with similar cultural background.

Key words: *culture, English teaching, individualism, globalization.*

As a teacher of English, I have tried to teach the culture of individualism behind the English language. By “culture of individualism” I mean the language’s cultural ideal in valuing individual worth and equality. In comparison with other languages, English grammar is not gendered and there is no formal and informal “you” to distinguish between higher and lower status. Gendered languages, such as the Romance and Slavic languages of Italian, Spanish, Portuguese, Russian, Polish, Ukrainian, have been linked to more gender inequality where these languages occur [6, p. 268]. English, from its Germanic and Romance origins, used to have these traits but has lost them over the years. But there is a long history of where this culture comes from. This paper will trace the history of individualism and present some problems in teaching this cultural feature of English to students who come from a different cultural background.

Where Did the Culture of Individualism Come From?

According to geneticists, modern humans evolved in East Africa some 200,000 years ago and began to migrate from this region 50-80,000 years ago [10]. During these hundreds of millennia, we lived in small bands that evolved a culture of egalitarianism involving the cooperation and respect of individuals because each member was expected to contribute to the survival of the group. Through gathering, scavenging, and hunting, we dealt and connected with nature directly: it was the means to our survival and understanding of ourselves in the life process. From this long span of time on the plains of East Africa emerged our inherited culture of egalitarianism and individualism, our innate desire for cooperation and equality and individual connection with nature.

Examples of this culture are seen in hunting and gathering Native American tribes’ naming traditions. As a general practice, a member of the tribe is given a name at birth but the name is subject to change during their lifetime due to changes in personality, experience, or the group members’ wish for that person. For example, Chief Sitting Bull was named Jumping Badger at birth but then was called “Slow” because of his careful and unhurried nature before earning his famous moniker for bravery [7]. This culture

also leaves room for people who do not change through their lives, as a Mohegan woman explains: “Some people are like lakes, in that they change very little as they age. [But] some people are like rivers. When you trace the Mississippi, or any other river at its source, it can be very small. Later on it can be wide and strong. When it meets the ocean it spreads out” [9].

Not all hunting and gathering and Native American societies were as free and equal as the examples given but a consensus of anthropological studies from around the world paint a picture that egalitarianism and individualism were the general rule in these early societies [3].

“The Worst Mistake in the History of the Human Race”

So what has happened to our cultural inheritance of egalitarianism and individualism? Jared Diamond describes what came next as “the worst mistake in the history of the human race”. Diamond argues that the advent of agriculture some 10,000 years ago has been a disaster for human equality and health. He cites studies that found that the average height of men and women decreased after agriculture was adopted and that tooth enamel and bone density also decreased due to a higher consumption of grain carbohydrates. Societies became pyramids with a small ruling class at the top and the mass of peasant/slave workers at the bottom, and buffered between by the military and merchant classes in the middle. Social inequality grew under this “kleptocracy”, with women becoming property, mere “baby machines”. This is the common culture of “civilization” that has displaced the hunter-gatherer tradition of equality and individual worth [2]. Civilization has decimated hunter-gatherer societies everywhere that the two have met but the culture of hunter-gatherers survives in our cultural DNA, much like the ability to learn grammar being hard-wired in our brains [8].

Agricultural civilization began in West Asia (“Middle East”) around 7-10,000 years ago and then spread to the three other major cultural matrices on the Eurasian continent: South Asia (India), East Asia (China), and finally, Europe (Greece-Rome). Civilization came late to Europe and the Romans were never really able to subdue the

pagan tribes of Europe. In fact, it was these tribes that eventually brought down the Roman Empire. These pagan tribes had the culture of our hunter-gatherer past: fiercely egalitarian with respect for the individual. The Christian religion that the Romans forced upon Europe fused with the native pagan tradition at first but their discordant beliefs eventually brought the base culture of egalitarianism and individualism to the surface again during the Middle Ages with stories such as *Heloise, Tristan and Isolt*, and *Parzival*. These medieval stories of individual heroism against suffocating Christian beliefs began to crack through this foreign cultural “pseudomorphosis” and would lead to the rebirth of individualism during the Renaissance and beyond to such iconic novels as *Don Quixote*, *The Magic Mountain*, and *Ulysses*: all celebrating the individual experience [1].

I was not born into this culture of individualism and so had to go through a long learning curve to understand it. Fortunately, I came to the US at a young enough age to have an early imprint and absorption of this adopted culture. But it wasn't until teaching English in Japan that I began to have a deeper understanding of the differences between my East Asian birth culture and my adopted culture of Western individualism. The cross-cultural problems that I encountered while trying to teach English helped to clarify my understanding of my Confucian background and my identity as a Western individual.

My Confucian background from Vietnam is part of the “chopstick culture matrix” in East Asia, stemming from China and spreading to Korea and Japan as well. People from this culture are collectivists, not individualists [4]. “The nail that sticks out will get hammered down” as the proverb states. I learned how true this saying was when I highly – or as it turned out, overly – praised a Japanese student for her excellent explanation of a difficult chapter from Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* in front of the entire class by calling her effort “outstanding”. I didn't see her in the next class or the next and later found out that she dropped the course. I quickly learned that being outstanding is not necessarily a positive thing in Japan and to save my praise or criticism of students for private meetings during office hours or writing it on their tests or papers.

Also problematic was waking up the few students who had an individual spirit but were confronted with the reality of an extremely collectivist society. This was especially true for female students, who as one told me in our discussion of The Matrix movie, “I know I’m being controlled but I’m a young woman in Japan. There’s not much I can do to change things”. Hearing this made me feel a bit sad for offering her “the red pill” to learn more about individualism but I felt I was teaching an important aspect of English and its culture. For students who had an independent spirit and did not want to live in Japan, studying or finding work abroad became their methods of escape from Japanese society.

While I was there (about 10 years ago), the Japanese education minister was promoting a more Western style teaching method in the universities. Professors were encouraged to allow students to ask questions during class for a more Socratic method of education. I heard that some of my Japanese colleagues were going to try this out at our university but when I asked one of my more individualistic students about it, he told me that after being encouraged to ask questions in class by a particular professor, he finally worked up the courage to ask a question but the professor gave him a bad look and didn’t even answer his question so he never asked a question in class again. This became the reason why I eventually left Japan: I realized that the Japanese education system didn’t really want individual thinkers and so felt that I was mere “window dressing” in their charade of promoting a more Western style of education.

After 7 years in Japan, I next moved to teach in Saigon, Vietnam, where I was born and had always wanted to return to teach. I applied to teach at a few universities but wasn’t able to get an official teaching job due primarily, I think, to my being a former citizen of the enemy state of South Vietnam. I did teach privately to a few local university students and found that they had the same problems in learning English as my Japanese students had had: too much rote memorization and a lack of an individualistic culture. Students applying to go to US colleges always had trouble in writing essays for their application or writing sample. In the limited time that we had, it was difficult to

teach them individual opinion in writing their essays so I resorted to giving them formulaic phrases and essay structures to memorize and reproduce under test situations. After a couple of years of doing this, I discovered that I had the same problem that I had had in Japan with Vietnamese culture: a lack of emphasis and training to develop the individual. The educational stress was always on repetition of what the culture was teaching.

Moving outside of the East Asian cultural zone, I next taught at the Lao American College in Vientiane, Laos. This area of Southeast Asia, previously referred to by the colonizing French as “Indo-chine”, was influenced more culturally by India than by China but was far enough away from India to not have adopted a caste system of its own. Being far enough removed from the civilizations of China and India, Lao culture has a freer and much less rigid society. There was a sense of freedom and allowance for individuality that I found refreshing after teaching in Japan and Vietnam. The students had a curiosity for knowledge and love of fun that I found delight in teaching them. They didn’t have much fear in making mistakes or in giving their opinions. They seemed to intuitively understand the readings I was giving them about the value of the individual. But unfortunately, the College President, who was a “former” communist party official, was using the school’s funds as his personal bank account. The salaries of teachers and staff were regularly one to two months behind payment. After a year of this I made the difficult decision to leave the College as staying would mean that I was condoning the President’s actions.

I taught in Poland next but I want to save that experience to discuss with what I currently see in Ukraine because the similar culture in both countries presents similar problems in English education. I will talk about my experience of teaching in Angola next. My living and teaching in Angola was one of the best experiences in my teaching career. Growing up in America, I noticed that we were very much segregated by race and class. Throughout Elementary, Jr. High and High school, I didn’t have an African American friend. It wasn’t until university that I began to have more contact with

African Americans and to study about their experience in the US. I learned that unless we are very socially conscious, we tend to accept the learned culture of fearing black people. I found this lesson to be true as my initial fear of living in Angola, due to the information I received, proved to be unfounded as I became more aware of the culture and people. The more contact and experience I had with people in the classroom and in daily life, the less fear I had. Against recommendation, I began to walk everywhere I went in Luanda and in the two years that I was there, I never had a problem.

Angolan culture has a Bantu base with a Portuguese Catholic overlay. Bantu culture is based on herding and light farming and with Portuguese colonization starting in the 16th century, Catholic civilization began to dominate the country. But Bantu culture is still a strong force in Angolan society as seen in their continued love of nature and freedom in dance movements. This is seen more in the lower classes as the upper classes have been much more strongly influenced by Catholicism due to their proximity with the Portuguese colonizers.

The problem that I had in teaching English to the Angolan upper classes was that they were a bit rigid and stiff in their approach to English. (I taught English to Angolan managers at a major oil company.) Catholic culture is hierarchical and formal and this was reflected in the demeanor and learning style of the Angolan upper class. So besides all the regular grammar and vocabulary lessons, I had them learn and sing English pop songs to get them to relax their overly formal way of speaking. I found this to work quite well as the music must have awoken the dormant Bantu soul sleeping in many of these managers. Through singing they loosened up and their pronunciation and manner of speech became less formal and more natural.

I also had students from the lower classes and they were my favorites. Catholicism certainly reached down to the masses in Angola but its influence was less strong than in the upper classes. Bantu culture of love of nature and freedom of expression continued to have a huge influence on the mass of society. Students from this class were a joy to teach because, like the Lao students, they didn't fear making

mistakes and always brought humor and energy to the classroom, often teasing each other and having fun. Though their English levels were lower than that of the managers that I taught, the lower stress that they brought to learning made their progress faster and more enjoyable.

But there were also sometimes problems with too much freedom of expression. Some students were too proud to listen to corrections or suggestions that were made. They constantly wanted to speak and express themselves and wound up dominating the class. Attempts to rein them in often proved difficult to do. So there can sometimes be too much of a good thing with individualism in the classroom.

My best teaching experience was with the secret surveillance force that US Embassy Luanda hired to watch over the Embassy's surroundings. The men were from the lower classes but very ambitious to learn English to earn a job with the security force inside the Embassy. We had class in a tiny room at the back of a house rented by the Embassy's security force. There was one tiny light bulb that lit the center of the tiny room and we all crowded around it with a small writing board to have class. It was the sparsest condition that I had ever taught in but it was also the most satisfying class that I had ever taught. I always enjoyed going to teach that class because the men were so cheerful and happy to be getting an opportunity to learn English to improve their lives. A couple of men were able to pass the English test and got jobs inside the Embassy and I was very proud of them and happy to have been able to help with their efforts.

I was hoping to have the same experience in Brazil as I had in Angola but the class system there stifled my efforts. Brazil's culture is similar to Angola's in that it's a mix of Portuguese Catholic and African Bantu but the base of the culture is from the indigenous peoples of Brazil, who were nearly decimated by the colonizing Portuguese (from an estimated number of millions to a few hundred thousand), similar to what happened to the Native American population in North America. The indigenous culture of Brazil is similar to that of the Native Americans: generally egalitarian with respect for nature and individuality. Half of the Brazilian population is a Pardo/brown mix of

indigenous and African, and they make up the entirety of the favela (slum) population around urban areas. I taught English to some youth leaders from a favela near Rio de Janeiro and found them to be very bright and motivated individuals. They had a sense of fairness and equality and knew that they were being cheated by society from basic human needs such as running water and electricity. Like the Lao students, they intuitively understood the readings and films I showed them dealing with individual value. They were making great strides with their English but as usual with any social program for the poor, the funding ran out and the English program was cut.

I also taught English to business people at a private school in an upper class area of Rio and like my experience with the Angolan managers, I found the Brazilian business people to be very formal and a bit rigid. I intended to try my method of singing songs to get them to loosen up but the school's pay turned out to be so low that I couldn't afford to stay in the country for long. Brazil's low pay and high cost of living, combined with its extremely unequal distribution of wealth, eventually drove me to leave the country.

My last experience of problems with teaching English and individualism in a different culture was in Poland and this will relate to my current experience of teaching in Ukraine because the two countries' cultures are very similar. In Poland I taught English privately to university students, young professionals, and business people and discovered the same general pattern of behavioral characteristics found in other Catholic countries that I taught in: more formality and a fear of making mistakes. To overcome these problems, I used the same techniques of getting students to sing English songs and introduced them to literature and films about individualism. These methods worked extremely well in reducing students' fears and formality with English. Polish students learned English and the values of individualism faster than in other areas of the world because these values were refined in Europe against the oppression of the Catholic Church. The egalitarian and individualistic pagan traditions of Europe have resisted the

Catholic hierarchy and they continue to do so to this day as seen in the recent protests in Poland against the Church's support for a proposed ban on abortion.

Though I have been in Ukraine for only a few months I can readily see the cultural similarities in Poland and Ukraine. Like its Slavic neighbor, Ukraine also has a European pagan cultural tradition and a Christian and recent Communist overlay. From its Christian and Communist past, students seem to show the general pattern of formality and fear in this formerly collectivist society [5]. I have the same plans of using songs and literature and films to reawaken Ukraine's individualist pagan past and through the revival of their spirit of individualism, I hope that I will be able to help in Ukraine's effort to Westernize. Individualism is an inseparable part of English culture and the teaching of English requires understanding of the culture to transmit it to students. Teachers should well learn the history and cultural legacy of individualism to help students gain competency in English language and culture. The use of literature, films, and songs are excellent ways to introduce and practice the culture of individualism.

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КРОС-КУЛЬТУРНІ ПРОБЛЕМИ У НАВЧАННІ АНГЛІЙСЬКОЇ МОВИ ТА ІНДИВІДУАЛІЗМ

У статті розглядаються крос-культурні проблеми, пов'язані з навчанням англійської мови та поширенням індивідуалістичної культури англо-мовних країн, спричиненим глобалізацією. Описані проблеми, з якими зіткнувся автор під час навчання англійської мови у країнах, де західний індивідуалізм не властивий культурам таких народів, як: Японія, В'єтнам, Лаос, Ангола, Бразилія, Польща та Україна. Робиться висновок, що допоки культивується дух індивідуалізму, сформувати справжню англомовну і крос-культурну компетентності буде неможливо.

Ключові слова: культура, навчання англійської мови, індивідуалізм, глобалізація.

Двейн Фен

КРОСС-КУЛЬТУРНЫЕ ПРОБЛЕМЫ В ОБУЧЕНИИ АНГЛИЙСКОМУ ЯЗЫКУ И ИНДИВИДУАЛИЗМ

В статье рассматриваются кросс-культурные проблемы, связанные с обучением английскому языку и распространением индивидуалистической культуры англо-язычных стран, вызванным глобализацией. Описаны проблемы, с которыми столкнулся автор во время обучения английскому языку в странах, где западный индивидуализм несвойственен культурам таких народов, как: Япония, Вьетнам, Лаос, Ангола, Бразилия, Польша и Украина. Делается вывод о том, что пока культивируется дух индивидуализма, сформировать настоящую англоязычную и кросс-культурную компетентности будет невозможно.

Ключевые слова: культура, обучение английскому языку, индивидуализм, глобализация.

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