

Bilingual Education and Learning about Culture (Part Two)

In the first part of this article I wrote about the need for parents and teachers to be clear just what cultural knowledge they wanted students in English programs and bilingual schools to have. I advised that students needed to become culturally competent as well as knowledgeable. It is not enough just to know about English-speaking culture. Students must be able to function in it competently as well.

Research tells us that a language learner is likely to become most competent in the culture of a language community where the following motives and dispositions apply:

1. The learner really needs to learn the language well in order to achieve important and personally selected goals.
2. The learner really wants to learn the language well, not only in order to achieve an objective goal (to please parents, pass a course, get a job, do

business, etc.), but also in order to participate in the life and culture of that language community.

Motive 1 is effective up to a point, when the learner has a strong *instrumental* reason (pleasing parents, getting a good job, etc.) for wanting to be culturally as well as linguistically competent. However, to be fully effective, the student needs to have an *integrative* reason as well, as we see in motive 2. That means that a student who really wants to be able to participate comfortably in the life of a different language community is likely to become more competent culturally and linguistically than one who just wants to succeed more narrowly. It helps if the student respects and admires the people and culture one is learning about. Hence it is most important that language teachers be good models and good people.

If we want our children to become culturally competent in an English-speaking culture we need to be clear what kind of cultural competence we're looking for. Are we looking to be competent for a preferred culture, such as American or British, or are we happy to become familiar with a range

of English-speaking cultural models and learn from all of them?

It is not easy to generalize about culture. Even within a single nation, which may have a strong, identifiable and easily presented culture, there are “cultural” differences based on gender, region, social class, level of education, authority and status. Culture changes. There are conventions of politeness and respectable behaviour, for example, that change over time or can be broken by some but not others. Nevertheless, a nation with a reasonably long and stable history can claim to have a culture and this culture is fairly quickly recognized as such by immigrants and foreign residents.

Differences from one English-speaking culture to another are evident enough that an American going to live in England will find many things strange, and vice versa. Indeed, an Englishman going to live in Scotland will find many things different from home, and vice versa. All other English speakers going to Australia find it strange. A Canadian friend who has recently gone to Queensland wrote that “Australia is a place where everything is the

same as Canada, but nothing is familiar”. So to model yourself culturally on an American or a New Zealander will help you to function in US or NZ environments, but less so in a UK or Canadian one. South Africa and Ireland present different challenges again. However, to sum up, whatever cultural model you are most exposed to – American, Scottish, Canadian or whatever – if it is an authentic English-speaking cultural model it will be sufficient to enable you to function in any English-speaking context. So don’t worry if your teacher is from New Zealand or South Africa or Ireland or Tasmania, his or her culture is authentic and will be immediately acceptable in any English-speaking country. In fact, if your teacher is Dutch or Belgian, Swiss, German or Scandinavian you most likely won’t have any problem either. (One must be careful in generalizing about non-native speaker competencies. However, as a general rule, the more linguistically competent a non-native speaker is, regardless of country of origin, the more likely he or she is to be culturally competent in an English speaking environment.)

Of course, no matter how closely one models oneself on an authentic cultural exemplar, one never becomes a cultural

“clone”. Inevitably, we carry into any new environment our core cultural values, expectations and priorities. Interacting with people of another culture, a culturally competent (i.e. adaptable) person still stands in a “third place”. That is the term coined by the German-American linguist Claire Kramsch to refer to our positioning in cross-cultural engagements. Interacting with, for example, an Australian, a Thai person, no matter how linguistically and culturally competent she may be in the Australian milieu, does not become an Australian and yet she no longer behaves as she would in a Thai setting. She is still fully Thai, but she is also bicultural, what the Polish-Australian sociologist Georg Smolicz called “an integrated bicultural” person. In this form she occupies a third place in cross-cultural interaction: neither solely Thai nor solely Australian, nor a fusion of the two, but another cultural entity, acceptable to her own core values and to the expectations of her Australian interlocutor.

What we are aiming at, therefore, in cultural competence development is not “cloning”, not the negation of our real selves, but the ability to participate in a culturally different environment honestly and effectively. This is quite

achievable. Many do it. All it requires is a genuine desire to achieve authentic cultural competence, willingness to learn by study, observation, trial and error, and confidence that we will attain our objective.