

# Spoken Discourse and Cultural Capsules - Triggers to Cross-Cultural Language Awareness

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## **Introduction**

Cultures vary. In high-context communication, most of the information exists in the context, is internalized in the people communicating, or is found in the physical context. Malaysia and the Malay community more specifically have been said to be a community where the message has to be inferred as it generally in indirect mode. Omar talks about beating around the bush (BAB) as a Malay norm especially when a request is being made. In contrast, in low-context communication, most of the information lies in explicit codes (Hall, 1976, 1983). Communication is more direct in such cultures. Samovar and Porter (2004) remind us, "Each human being is unique and shaped by countless factors, culture being but one of them" (p. 24).

So what is the connection between culture and language/communication? Clark and Ivancic (1991) say:

... language forms cannot be considered independently of the ways they are used to communicate in context. Further, individual acts of communication in context cannot be considered independently of the social forces which have set up the conventions of appropriacy for that context. (p. 170)

Language teachers must realize the importance of seeing culture as integrated at all levels of language. With the emergence of more and more non-native speakers of English, with the growth of more and more multilingual societies, with internationalization and globalization, it is vital to integrate cultural norms with language teaching. However, according to Liddicoat (1997), this is far from being the dominant view professed by language teachers.

In this paper I will discuss a number of ways of incorporating cultural awareness in language teaching.

## Language Awareness

So how do we go about incorporating culture when teaching English? One way of incorporating culture in the language classroom is through the use of a language awareness curriculum. Donmall (1985, in Wolfram, 1998) defines language awareness as “a person’s sensitivity to and conscious awareness of the nature of language and its role in human life”. The language awareness curriculum is an approach to language education promotes greater understanding of the ways in which language functions in society.

Critical language awareness approaches can be strengthened by requiring students to develop skills used in sociolinguistic and ethnographic research in order to become proficient at observing, analyzing and evaluating language use in the world around them (Egan-Robertson & Bloome, 1998). This is consonant with critical approaches (Freire, 1970) in that knowledge is located within the student and the community rather than solely with experts and published materials. In making sense of the students’ everyday lived experiences in this context, it is appropriate to focus on individual experience to appreciate differences between and within cultures (Berger & Luckmann, 1966). Students are encouraged and helped to become active investigators of language usage in the world around them.

Status is displayed and recognized during human interaction, whether in large groups or in dyads, and the perception of its presence is a cornerstone of the social order in any society (Asch, 1946). Status is omnipresent in almost any human interaction and is found across cultures (*see* David, 2004c). A significant goal in communication is to retain harmony among social groups, thereby avoiding loss of face, and to reinforce role and status differences (Gao & Ting-Toomey, 1998). However, the emphasis put on status and the extent of hierarchical differences vary across societies. In societies which put a great deal of premium on hierarchy and status people of higher status are more likely than their lower status counterparts to start a conversation (Packwood, 1974) and to interrupt it (Natale, Entin & Jaffee, 1979); they tend to speak longer (Sorrentino & Boutillier, 1975) and louder (Packwood, 1974).

For language learners to be made aware of the relationship between communication styles and norms and status differentials in the teaching input phase of the lesson I gave some input to learners regarding who speaks more, monopolises conversation and who takes the floor and who permits interruptions.. An awareness of language and status/power is also noted in the use of appropriate address forms. Students were told of case studies where intentionally withholding the use of a title could have significance as in the case where a white American policeman even though he was told by his black speech partner that the latter was a doctor he intentionally did not address him as such and instead used the word “boy” thus demeaning him. After this initial input by the teacher learners were asked to record

casual real time interactions and analyse the data bearing in mind the relationship between talk and status. The following is an example of such an output produced by one language learner.

### *Example 1*

Student : Good morning, Puan. (*Lecturer smiles back and nods*). It's regarding my CPC tutorial. I'm from Monday Encik Talat's class (*paused for a moment because student forgot to address Prof. Talat by his title*).

Lecturer : Yes, Prof. Talat.

Student : Yes...Prof. Talat. His Monday's class has been abolished and I was allowed to go any of the CPC class. I wanna ask whether you have class on Thursday?

Lecturer : Yes. 2 to 3 p.m. and 3 to 4 p.m.

Student : Alright, can I will go any one of them?

Lecturer : Yes, no problem.

### *Student's analysis*

#### *Status & Address Forms/Interruptions*

"I start by greeting her good morning, *puan* (Mrs). She smile back and nodded. I paused for a moment because I forgot to address Prof Talat in the correct way. Then my lecturer corrected me. And I repeat by echoing "Yes... Prof. Talat" before continuing my sentence. From this conversation I can say that there is careful turn taking by both of us. She only interrupted in the beginning where I forgot to address Prof. Talat in the correct way. Later she allowed me to finish my sentence and when I asked her a question she replied back."

Here is another example of Interruptions/Power and Gender. The students had been told that the literature showed that men tended to interrupt women to show power.

### *Example 2*

Setting: Dr. S's office in college.

Chinese female Student (S) with Male college Master (M):

"An extract of my conversation between myself (Choir Leader) with my newly appointed College Master, Dr. SM. I was performing the speech act of request. Through this conversation, I examined the conversational patterns and conflict management styles between Dr. Sabri and myself based on the paper by Prof. Christina L. Kunz on Language Patterns and Interaction Styles during Contract

Negotiations Sessions: Power, Race, and Gender.”

- 1 S : Good morning doctor.
- 2 M : Good morning. Have a seat. How can I help you?
- 3 S : I would like to discuss with you about the college subsidy for the choir members.
- 4 M : Alright.
- 5 S : As you know doctor, the choir will be competing in the annual UM Music Festival next month and...
- 6 M : I have allotted the funds as advised by the President of your Creative Club, haven't I?
- 7 S : Yes, we have received the funds. However, we would like to bring to your attention that RM600 is insufficient for the whole choir.
- 8 M : But I allocated the same amount to the Nasyid team and also the Pop Band. It would not be fair if I give the choir more than what other groups are getting.
- 9 S : Yes, doctor. But the choir consist of 40 members as compared to 10 members in the Nasyid team and 8 members in the Pop Band. After dividing the RM600, each member will only get RM15. This is not enough to cover the cost of buying the material for they costume and tailoring. The members would have to foot out quite a lot at the end of the day.
- 10 M : Did the choir get a placing last year?
- 11 S : Doctor, we have always believed in joining for the spirit of competition. Winning or losing is another thing.
- 12 M : True, true.
- 13 S : What is most important here is the choir has potential to win and we would like to give the judges a good first impression through their costume. A tight budget will not get us anywhere near to this target.
- 14 M : Alright. How much does the choir need?
- 15 S : About RM40 per person.
- 16 M : RM 40 per person?! Wow! That will be about RM1600.
- 17 S : Yes, doctor. But don't worry. We will ask the members to return the costume to the college so that the next batch can use it again.
- 18 M : Alright, that's not too bad. I will discuss with the Accounts Manager and check whether we have extra funds this year. Get back to me end of this week?
- 19 S : Ok. Thank you very much doctor.
- 20 M : You are welcome.

### *Student's Analysis*

From the conversation, I was interrupted a couple of times by Dr. S. He interrupted me from going on with my points (turns 6, 8 and 10). The interruptions showed power play. Dr. S who holds a higher status could interrupt me but it would be rude if I had done the same. Thus, in my opinion, the question on who interrupts more does not come from the gender factor (as argued by Robin Lakoff in *The Silencing of Women in Kira Hall*) but it is a matter of who holds the higher status in the conversation. However, I feel I managed to maintain the topic of my discussion with him by giving him rational opinions and reasoning which he agreed as can be seen at lines 9, 12 and 14. In this conversation, I did most of the talking. This is because I was requesting extra funds from Dr. S and I had to explain to him the need of the Choir Club. However, at a point, Dr. S may have perceived I was dominating the conversation and was too insistent with him even to the point of giving him the breakdown of the funds. Thus, there was a diversion at line 10 when he asked me whether the choir won last year. It was most probably to remind me that the college does not need to spend so much on the choir. Someone may have told him that the choir has not been winning for the last 4 years!

In summary then, such awareness on the part of language learners regarding the importance of status and other cultural variables on talk can be triggered by an initial talk on the part of the teacher who provides case studies and data and examples from the literature. The language learner is then asked to record, transcribe and analyse data easily obtainable from his living environment.

I should also state that sociolinguistic norms can be introduced at many levels. At lower levels an inquiry approach could be practised. The teacher could ask the following questions:-

“What do you call your mother?”

“Do you wish your mother?”

“Who do you call Sir? If someone is older than you, what do you call him?”

### **Texts**

Apart from awareness of language in authentic discourse and real time interactions, language awareness can be triggered by the teacher through the use of culturally appropriate material culled from a number of texts which focus on any one speech act. One of the important variables affected by culture is speech acts. Differences in accepted norms of behavior are generally reflected in speech acts. A speech act is the function performed by our utterances. For instance greetings (David, 2004a), complimenting (David, 1999); disagreement (see Jariah and David, 1996); directives

(David and Kuang 1999) indirectness in women's talk ( David 2004d) and even obituaries (David and Yong, 2002) are all examples of speech acts. The way a speech act is performed in any given language can be very culture specific (Schmidt and Richards, 1980; Wierzbicka, 1985). Culture-specific speech acts necessitate a familiarity with the value systems of the interlocutors in the interaction.

Texts (see also David and Norazit, 1996 on the opening the Muslim world to non-Muslim students through a reading text) from which cultural capsules are extracted can be used to make learners aware of the differences in certain speech acts albeit in English, when used by native speaker(s) of English. Speech acts differ cross-culturally in their distribution, function and frequency of occurrence. It has been argued that learners of English must be made consciously aware of the differences in certain speech acts when used by a native speaker of English and by a second language learner of the language (see also David, 2004). David (1999) shows how differences in the pragmatic and sociolinguistic behaviour of native (NS) and non-native speakers (NNS) vis-a-vis compliment giving and receiving can be used by the language teacher as a basis for raising consciousness of the culturally different ways of giving and receiving compliments. Compliments, like apologies are primarily aimed at maintaining, enhancing, anointing or supporting the addressee's "face" (Goffman, 1967) and are generally regarded as positive politeness strategies. Extracts culled from a novel *Bicycle Days* where a young American stays with a Japanese host family in Tokyo show a number of compliments by the young American to a number of speakers, both Japanese and Americans. The Japanese hostess on being told by the young American guest that her food was good responded by saying, "Eat" and elsewhere she diverted the compliment by saying that her husband helped her with the cooking. In contrast, a young American friend who had been complimented by the young American protagonist responded by merely saying, "Thank you" (see David, 1999). The responses however, vary and the extracts clearly indicate that in some cultures an acceptance of the compliment is the norm, while in other cultures an acceptance would signify an infringement of cultural norms.

Information about differences in the pragmatic and sociolinguistic behaviour of NS and NNS vis-à-vis compliment giving and receiving can be used by the language teacher as a basis for comparison since there are culturally different ways of responding to compliments. In some cultures an acceptance would signify some derogatory comments about the compliment receiver and the norm is to deny or negate the compliment. In discourse with the native speaker of the target language "thank you" is an expression of gratitude made in response to a compliment and is an adjunct to the function of complimenting. Data of native speaker responses from a comparative study on native and non-native responses indicates that native speakers responded to compliments by an expression of thanks, followed by either a redundant

question, "Do you like it?" or by expressing pleasure "I'm glad you like it" (Eisentein and Bodman, 1986:171).

The responses of native and non-native speakers to compliments are therefore different and the "correctness" or appropriacy or politeness of the response depends on the socio-pragmatic rules of language use. "To be polite is saying the socially acceptable thing". (Lakoff, 1975:53). In some cultures it would not do to respond with a "Thank You" for this would mean that one was openly acknowledging the fact, for example that one was pretty, had a handsome husband, etc. A western-educated Malaysian colleague for whom English has become her first language who protested that she only responded with "thanks" to compliments was observed to be clarifying and elaborating after the initial thanks. She would say, "Thanks. I felt like a change," when complimented on a nice sari.

There are not only different ways of responding to compliments but the number of times people compliment, the kinds of things people compliment and the words they use to compliment differ from culture to culture. For example, it will not do to compliment Malaysian Indian (Tamil) babies for being pretty, for this, it is believed by this ethnic group, will result in bad luck. This is because, the values and cultural norms underlying the English language which a non-native speaker uses, are not necessarily the same as those of a native speaker:

Raising students' awareness of these cultural differences resulting in varying responses to compliments will help to improve the communicative competence of language learners. Some examples of spoken discourse culled from a range of texts is provided as an example of a teaching input and to act as a catalyst to discussion on cross-cultural differences in this specific speech act.

## Responses to Compliments

### Example 1

A : Your English is improving. I'm pleased with your work

B : Oh no. My English is not very good

(Levine et al, 1987:23)

### Example 2

A : You should be very proud of your progress

B : No, it's not true. You are a good teacher but I am not a good student

(Levine et al, 1987: 22)

### Example 3

A : What a pretty dress!

B : This old rag? I bought it at a sale

(Ekstrand, 1981:273)

### Example 4

A : ...now you are clever

B : You made me clever sir

(Sri Delima, 1976:149)

In examples 1 and 2, used to teach English in America B, a Korean disagrees with and denies the compliment. Humility and modesty are reflected in such a denial. Negating the compliment is a deferential act aligned with cultural norms and value systems.

Let me also add that the language in which compliments are couched vary across cultures. What is considered good or pretty in one culture may not be the same in another. Therefore, similes and comparisons used will vary across cultures as shown in the following examples.

Example 5

She is like the moon and has beautiful eyes

(Levine, 1987:21)

Example 6

Your earrings are pure gold aren't they?

(Levine, 1987:21)

When we tried Example 5, "She is like the moon" on young Malaysians they were offended and did not perceive it as a compliment as they thought they were being told that they had gained weight! In a culture where one does not ask about price Example 6 comes across as very rude and is not at all seen as a compliment. A British professor once after a summer break informed his Hong Kong students that they were tanned. They were upset because tanned to them equated to be dark and they were proud of their fair complexions. The Professor was using the normal compliment given to British who go to hot climates for a holiday and for whom it would be seen as a compliment as the aim of the holiday is to obtain a tan (Littlewood, personal communication)!

Such language awareness approaches can help ESL students in their acquisition of a range of appropriate varieties and registers of English by training students to look for and recognize patterns in different language varieties.

I now provide an example of indirectness from Amy Tan's latest book (2003). This extract is useful as the teacher by using a range of intonation patterns and a range of facial expressions can convey different meanings. Moreover, the text can be used as a stimulus to ask questions on the language learners' preferences – directness or indirectness in discourse?

### **Saying No: The Chinese Way: Reading beyond the words**

My aunt and uncle were about to return to Beijing after a three-month visit to the United States. On their last night I announced I wanted to take them out to dinner.



- Amy : Are you hungry?  
Uncle : Not hungry.  
Aunt : Not too hungry. Perhaps you're hungry?  
Amy : A little.  
Uncle/  
aunt : We can eat, we can eat, then.  
Amy : What kind of food?  
Uncle : Oh doesn't matter. Anything will do. Nothing fancy, just some simple food is fine.  
Amy : Do you like Japanese food? We haven't had that yet.  
Uncle : We can eat it.  
Aunt : We haven't eaten it before. Raw fish.  
Amy : Oh you don't like it? Don't be polite. We can go somewhere else.  
Aunt : We are not being polite. We can eat it.

Amy drove them to Japantown and they walked past several restaurants.

- Amy : Not this one, not this one either (as if searching for a certain Japanese restaurant). Here it is (in front of a Chinese restaurant).  
Aunt : (Relieved) Oh Chinese food!  
Uncle : You think like a Chinese.  
Amy : Its your last night in America. So don't be polite. Act like an American.

(Adapted from Amy Tan, 2003)

This extract brings to the fore the indirectness in discourse prevalent in many Asian cultures and how face is kept for both speech partners and politeness maintained. With such a text the need to read beyond the words and look for nonverbal and paralinguistic features like intonation ("Raw fish!" with facial expression that indicates it is not quite what one likes) can be pointed out by the teacher. Questions like:-

- "Can you provide an example of how you would ask a good friend for her lecture notes?" (speech act of request)  
"Are you direct or indirect in your talk?"  
"If indirect, why?"  
"With whom are you direct/indirect?"  
"Have you experienced a similar problem (as above) when you invite someone for a meal?"  
"How do you know the speech partner is happy/not happy with your suggestions?"

Apart from the teacher collecting examples perhaps students too can be asked to collect examples of such discourse either from novels/ plays etc. and/or real time interactions.

### **Operationalising the Theory**

We have arrived at the crossroads of language learning. The target language must reflect local cultures, if English is to be used not only within the nation but as a means of communicating with our Asean neighbours. Kachru (1987) emphasizes that we must recognize “multi-norms of styles and strategies” and “socio-linguistic pluricentricity”. Teachers must therefore be aware of cultural and sociolinguistic differences underlying the communicative behaviour of native and non-native users of English. This is not easy especially in multiracial settings.

I must admit that operationalising the concept may create problems especially if the teacher herself is not aware of cultural differences underlying the communicative behaviour of native and non-native users of English. However, such ignorance is not insurmountable with texts culled from reading texts, plays, novels, real time interactions etc. This paper argues that the language teachers’ role is to alert and sensitize his students on the differences in the communication styles and expectations of native speakers using English as contrasted with non-native speakers. The ability to switch and accommodate to their interlocutors will result in a high degree of communicative effectiveness. Through the use of comparative teaching materials showing both native and non-native responses to a range of speech acts, a teacher helps to build and sustain such sensitivity.

It is hoped that with such an approach language learners will change their conversational styles depending on whether English is used intra-nationally or internationally, with native speakers of English or with Asean speakers using English. It is believed that an explicitly contrastive discussion of responses/formulas used by different speakers will be helpful in improving the learner’s performance and his understanding of the native speaker’s (TL) culture and at the same time help him appreciate his own.

The study of a broader repertoire of speech acts is strongly urged as it will make learners of their own cultural wealth. A comparative approach indicating native and non-native responses to native speakers and non-native speakers of a range of the more frequently used speech acts like greetings (see David, 2004a,); requests (Lim, David, Kuang 2004); directives (David and Kuang, 1999) will sensitise learners to the culture-specific differences in language behaviour. Inevitably, learners will have a repertoire of speech styles which they can switch depending on their interlocutor.

## Conclusion

As culture must be taught in conjunction with language, and not as an adjunct, it is necessary to develop new materials for language teaching (see David 2004b). Materials which are produced must enable the learner to gain exposure to selected reading texts in English and authentic data from real time interactions. Such material should contain extensive dialogue between members of different speech communities or even within a community across gender or age. These texts could be used as a source for consciousness-raising of the many manifestations of the response patterns to different speech acts e.g. greetings, compliments etc. Teachers could compile extracts of such dialogues to initiate discussion on talk across cultures, for instance “appropriate” responses to compliments, to greetings etc. Thus, it can be seen that in such an analysis of both spoken discourse culled from texts and authentic discourse the teacher can make use of such input to raise consciousness among language learners of cross-cultural differences of a range of speech acts. Such knowledge and awareness of cultural variation in speech will make learners communicatively competent, having “the knowledge of linguistic and related communicative conventions that speakers must have to create and sustain conversational cooperation (Gumperz, 1982:209).” Knowledge and awareness of cultural variation in discourse will make learners communicatively competent.

At this juncture let me introduce a caveat. It must be emphasised that the language teacher cannot provide exhaustive information about other cultures and norms of speaking but what the teacher can do is to make learners aware of the cultural factor in language. Capsules drawn from vignettes can be culled from reading materials, plays and real time interactions. Language learners too, once made aware of discourse differences across cultures can help to build this data base of spoken discourse in real time interaction.

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