

Issues in teaching ‘culture’ in Uzbekistan

Natalya Tsarikova looks at the role of ‘Culture’ and ‘culture’ for present-day Uzbek learners of English.

Cultural and historical background

Before I start to discuss the issues of teaching culture in Uzbekistan I would like to acquaint readers with recent economic and political developments in Uzbekistan that have undoubtedly influenced many spheres of life, including education. First of all, it is necessary to note that Uzbekistan is one of the former Soviet republics, which explains the multinational composition of the population of the country. Uzbekistan has been the home for many Russians, Ukrainians, Germans, Koreans, etc. from Soviet times. One of the influences of the Soviet Union on Uzbekistan is the influence of Russian culture and language, which has been the language of communication for all peoples living in Uzbekistan. That is why in my article I often refer to both Russian and Uzbek languages and cultures, which became interwoven for many people in Uzbekistan.

After Uzbekistan gained its independence in 1991, the government began to establish political and cultural contacts with many countries. This open policy after the period of a rather closed existence within the Soviet Union attracted a lot of foreign collaboration into the country. Many foreign representative offices and joint ventures were opened, which created a lot of job opportunities requiring good knowledge of English. The educational reforms resulted in an increased number of students going to study abroad and a number of foreign specialists coming to Uzbekistan to lecture on professional topics and share their knowledge and experience. On the whole the recent changes have led to the increased popularity of English.



It is commonly accepted that language and culture are inseparable. Educators agree that it is impossible to teach a foreign language without teaching culture. Teaching culture in Uzbekistan is an inseparable part of teaching a language. So, what is understood by ‘teaching culture’ in Uzbekistan?

There are a lot of definitions of culture. As a matter of fact, educators cannot agree on one single definition. Numerous theorists and practitioners view culture differently. Some view it as civilization, the great achievement of a people as reflected in their history, social institutions, works of art, architecture, music and literature—commonly referred to as ‘big C’ culture. Culture is also viewed as the customs, traditions or practices that people carry out as part of their everyday lives—‘small C’ culture (Halverson 1985 cited in Moran 2001). In Uzbekistan, however, the overwhelming majority of English teachers teach the ‘big C’, i.e. the history of the people who speak the target language, its literature and famous persons; this is important—one cannot learn a foreign

language without trying to understand the values of the people of the target language. The given situation in ELT most likely resulted from the Grammar Translation approach that has been used for many years in Uzbekistan, and is still being used by many teachers. ‘A fundamental purpose of learning a language’ according to the principles of the Grammar Translation method ‘is to be able to read literature written in it. The literary language is felt to be superior to spoken language. Students’ study of the target culture is limited to its literature and fine arts’ (Larsen-Freeman 2000). Thus, in the textbooks on English, there are plenty of examples of ‘big C’: there are texts on the sights of London with the description of all its famous museums, the detailed geographical facts about the British Isles and its industrial and agricultural regions, not to mention the autobiographies and works of famous people. Thus, for students it is not difficult for them to give you some encyclopedic information about Great Britain or the USA but it becomes challenging for them to carry on a regular conversation. Now when there are more and more students going to study abroad and meeting a lot of English-speaking people here in Uzbekistan, they need English mainly to converse with native speakers of English. There has been a great shift in the learning objectives towards conversational English as opposed to the Soviet period when English was taught and learnt mainly in order to be able to understand the written language. It goes without saying that knowledge of English will help students to gain better professional positions in the future where they will need to use it in negotiations with their foreign counterparts.

However, I would like to emphasize that teaching both ‘big C’ and ‘small C’ is critical here in Uzbekistan. Earlier, in the times of the Soviet Union, neglecting the teaching of ‘small C’ was predetermined by the political situation in the country—it was hardly ever possible that people met native speakers of English or went abroad. Now the situation has changed and students of English and other languages in Uzbekistan have plenty of opportunities to practice their language skills with native speakers of these languages. Indeed a lot of students leaving their schools and universities need to communicate in English in real life situations and surprisingly find that often their language expression is full of misunderstanding and misinterpretation. Foreign (English) language study often does not enable its graduates to sustain an effective dialogue with native speakers of English.

One can think that a good knowledge of grammar and vocabulary is all that’s needed for a successful dialogue. In fact, one needs to be aware of a lot of things to fully understand the interlocutor, his choice of words and the reasons behind this choice. It is commonly acknowledged that ‘Language simultaneously reflects culture, and is



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influenced and shaped by it'. (Jiang 2001) So, it is important to realize that any choice of words by an interlocutor is predetermined by his/her culture.

This statement is obviously true for both native speakers and for foreign language students who are trying to express their ideas in words. It has been noticed that if a foreign language learner is interculturally competent and is knowledgeable about the culture of the target language he is able to '...communicate effectively and appropriately...' (Lustig and Koester 1999 cited in Moran 2001). But when a

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learner lacks intercultural competence and knowledge about a foreign culture, he/she automatically transfers his/her own culture and accustomed behaviors onto the foreign language and so acts according to the norms of his/her own native culture. This apparently causes misunderstandings on both sides. Greetings are often a reason for such misunderstandings here in Uzbekistan. A native speaker of English that happened to come to Uzbekistan when greeting a person naturally says 'Hi, how are you?' and expects the answer 'Fine, thanks. How are you?' To the big surprise of the foreigner, the Uzbek can start talking about his/her own state of things and his/her family, not being aware that this question implies the short answer given above. Moreover, it is quite natural for an Uzbek, in answer to a greeting, to ask an interlocutor about his wife or her husband, his/her family, parents, etc., which can easily shock the foreigner (taken that the interlocutor has not been acquainted with the family of the foreigner). In Uzbek culture it is considered polite when greeting a person to ask about his/her family and, if a person does not inquire about the family of his/her interlocutor, he is thought to be rude.

Many reasons for cultural clashes lie in cultural differences. For example, there are some questions that are considered taboo in some cultures (e.g. American) but rather acceptable in the other ones. Uzbekistan, for instance, is very much a family-oriented society. Families are deeply respected here. That is why the questions like 'Are you married?' and, if you are not, 'Why not?' are quite acceptable. Questions about children and salary are acceptable as well. It is necessary to notice that the notion of privacy is not as vital here as in some other cultures (for example American). Moreover, there are no such expressions (private space or privacy) in either Uzbek or Russian. Thus, a desire to seclude oneself and have some private time and space is absolutely natural for many Americans, whereas Uzbeks would find it strange. Moreover, an inherent strong feeling of hospitality will make them feel guilty that they could not please their guest. Therefore, being ignorant about such cultural do's and don'ts can result in misunderstanding or sometimes even embarrassment for the speakers.

The ability to socialize and the notion of small talk seem to be an inborn skill of the majority of Americans or British people—naturally with variations between more and less outgoing persons. In Uzbekistan, however, modesty is one of

the main virtues. So, it is quite common for Uzbeks to be very quiet at a cocktail party and slow to initiate a conversation. Therefore, to help English language learners avoid embarrassing situations like this, an English teacher needs to raise students' awareness of these cultural differences.

Another example could be the issue of politeness. It is common knowledge that politeness exists in every culture and can be expressed differently in different cultures. In some cultures it is acceptable to change intonation to sound polite (Russian) but others require the use of modals and polite words (English). For instance, in Russian the sentence 'Give me a pencil.' can sound different and consequently have different meanings depending on the intonation. A rising intonation makes it a polite request whereas a falling intonation makes it a demanding sentence. Moreover, the intonation makes the interlocutor aware of the degree of politeness or rudeness/sharpness of the utterance. In English a lot depends on the modals and polite words that are added to the sentence. (Could you give me the pencil, please? Would you give me a pencil? Give me a pencil, please.) That is why, in some cases, teaching modals becomes teaching culture as well. It is not rare that learners of English in Uzbekistan, when having a conversation with an English speaker, try to sound polite by changing the intonation instead of using modals.

Another important cultural issue is turn taking. Uzbek is a more polychronic than monochronic culture and thus, it is very common that people interrupt each other, make comments and/or ask questions. So, when it comes to a conversation with an English speaking person, who comes from a monochronic society, it can become a very sensitive issue.

Some teachers believe that only free language practice with native speakers or immersion into the cultural environment will help. That may be true but clearly not everyone has such an opportunity and even provided that one has, why not help him/her be more culturally sensitive in order to successfully communicate in a foreign culture. To help students become more effective learners of English the teaching of 'small C' culture '... such as language, verbal and non-verbal, including a variety of forms: body movements, eye contact, time, space, touching and the use of the social situation' (Hall 1959 cited in Moran 2001) should become an inseparable/essential part of ELT in Uzbekistan.

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