# Developing Meta-Cultural Skills, Strategies and Awareness Support for a Meta-Cultural Approach

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## Abstract

The complex, cause and effect relationship between language and culture has been an important area of inquiry in Applied and Socio Linguistics, ever since it was originally proposed within the theory of Linguistic Relativity (1929) and the Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis (1940), These theories stated that the basic components of any language are indivisible from the perspectives of the users and therefore affect the way a certain language group views the world. Present research investigating this relationship is more concerned with how cultural differences influence the language learning process. Considering recent trends focusing on English as a Global Language and the diversity of learners and contexts, attention has shifted to developing cultural awareness and competence as an essential component of second language acquisition. With the steady increase of international travel, global economy, communication technology and the prospect that most people will have frequent and sustained contact and experience with other cultures in the future, it is no longer adequate that language learners merely have a command or a level of competence in a language. What is required, in this *brave new world*, is a deeper understanding and a comprehensive arsenal of meta-skills which will assist learners with acquisition and navigation of the finer nuances and sub levels of communication and interaction. Apart from language, what other skills do learners require? What are common problems that all people have when engaging with a new culture or in a new environment? How can these be taught or acquired out of context? What is the role of the teacher in facilitating cultural awareness? In seeking answers to these questions, this paper will critically review relevant research, analyze various contexts and methodologies and attempt to determine what type of approach is best suited to the needs and environments of today's EFL learners. In conclusion, some ideas will be proposed which may provide insight into the nature, and feasibility of a cross culturally appropriate pedagogy.

## Introduction

That language is inseparably intertwined with culture is by no means a new concept, originally proposed within the theory of Linguistic Relativity (1929) and the Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis (1940), stating that the basic components of any language are indivisible from the perspectives of the users and therefore affect the way a certain language group views the world. Present research investigating this relationship aims to understand and explain differences in language learning and how contexts, cultures and methodologies affect each other and influence the overall learning process. In light of recent trends focusing on English as a Global Language and the diversity of learners and contexts, attention has shifted to developing cultural awareness and competence as an essential component of second language acquisition. With the steady increase of

international travel, global economy, communication technology and the prospect that most people will have frequent and sustained contact and experience with other cultures in the future, it is no longer adequate that language learners merely have a command or a level of competence in a language. What is required, in this brave new world, is a deeper understanding and a comprehensive arsenal of meta-skills which will assist learners with acquisition and navigation of the finer nuances and sub levels of communication and interaction. Apart from language, what other skills do learners require? What are common problems that all people have when engaging with a new culture or in a new environment? How can these be taught or acquired out of context? What is the role of the teacher in facilitating cultural awareness? In seeking answers to these questions, this paper will critically review relevant research, analyze various contexts and methodologies and attempt to determine what type of approach is best suited to the needs and environments of today's EFL learners. In conclusion, some ideas will be proposed which may provide insight into the nature, and feasibility of a cross culturally appropriate pedagogy.

Recent literature on curriculum innovation and second language acquisition in general has determined an almost unanimous need for more globalised and context sensitive teaching methodologies, however, has been fairly inconclusive on how to best meet these needs. Merryfield (1993) expresses that "global education is one of the more ambiguous innovations in education today." Most approaches and methodologies have been criticized as either imposing culture or using culturally specific methods in an inappropriate context. Typical texts and incorporations of cultural content offer largely trivial, unrelated and irrelevant facts on the target culture and as a result are limited in potential to learning about cultures rather than learning from them. Widdowson (1998b:331) suggests that although it is necessary for learners to develop a basic capacity for cultural awareness, it is problematic to introduce the necessary skills and strategies within the context of the classroom. He argues that the

classroom can create a community with its own cultural context providing relevance necessary to acquire these new competencies and most importantly a forum were language and culture are learned from rather than about. There have been various suggestions as to how to cope with the diversity, idiosyncrasy and specialized needs of learning environments as well as transferring control of teaching styles and methodologies from largely Western dominated pedagogy to local teachers who can use their own experiences to determine and develop more unique, context specific and valid approaches. Popular methods and strategies which are essentially the buzz words of recent trends, namely critical thinking, autonomy, student centered, communicative, are culturally loaded and not necessarily appropriate across contexts (Aoki, N. & Smith, R. 1999). Similarly, many common classroom practices such as content based or communicative approaches that require interaction, group work, learner initiative taking and creativity may be in direct opposition to the learner's culture. The majority of materials providing cultural content, tend to over generalize, reinforce stereotypes and in terms of fostering awareness, may do more harm than good (Sargent, T. 2004). Aoki, etal. (1999) conclude that definitions of culture and pedagogy must be more flexible or modified in order to avoid misconceptions and stereotyping. They propose that the pigeon holing of cultures and teaching methods is counterproductive and that teachers and students need to collaborate to create a "negotiated culture" in the classroom and determine an appropriate methodology accordingly. Further support for the need for more context/learner sensitive approaches comes from Norton's (2001) survey of varying levels of learner participation and non-participation in language classes. In explaining these, she discovers that learners have different investments in various members of a community and tend to feel least comfortable communicating with those members with which they have the most invested. Based on these relationships, learners tend to create imagined communities and imagined identities, the role, status or position of

which, influences affective factors including confidence, comfort and anxiety levels and consequently, subsequent levels of participation. In order to accommodate diversity, acknowledge learner differences, imagined communities/identities and prevent the onset of non-participation, Norton suggests that teachers make necessary modifications by considering learner investments and encouraging them to envision themselves as living in multiple communities with multiple identities. Canagarajah (2002) also argues that more neutral approaches which consider diversity are required. Concluding that a "post method", strategy based approach be universally appropriate, he critically examines efforts by Holliday, A. (1994) and Penington, M. (1995) towards a potentially cross cultural methodology.

The models introduced by Holliday and Penington, address some important issues in the search for an appropriate method, particularly in terms of teacher flexibility and context accommodation. Holliday argues that Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) is the natural progression and evolution of all methods and is therefore superior and universally appropriate. He fails to consider that this method, even when reformed or modified, remains Western based and therefore contains cultural, pedagogical and ideological elements which may be an imposition to non Western contexts. As Canagarajah points out, he does not qualify his ideas by providing sufficient details as to how this approach can be made culturally neutral and appropriate. Whether or not CLT is the optimum development of all other approaches is irrelevant if it goes against the local learning styles and teaching methods, thereby imposing a new paradigm which may not be welcome or even useful. Penington's model on the other hand does not hold any particular method over another, but rather describes how teachers innovate and modify different approaches to suit their various contexts. Although her model offers flexibility ands is case sensitive, it nevertheless assumes that all teachers will adopt some sort of prescribed method. She does not leave possibility for teachers to stray from the mainstream or

even attempt to create their own methods. Canagarajah's, major criticism of these models and the impetus behind his "post method approach" stems from the fact that both models are deductive, beginning at the top and moving to the bottom, starting with a method, evaluating the context and finally determining any modifications and adaptation requirements necessitated by the particular environment. Preisler (1999) observes similar deficiencies in his study of EFL contexts in Denmark. Investigating the appropriateness of Standard English across various domains, he distinguishes between English from above (international/external communication) and English from below (local, personal and specific communication), and identifies several sub groups within the community that have quite different needs, uses and means of learning English. He concludes that for maximum effect and success, the variety of English taught should be presented in its central, cultural contexts and compared with corresponding contexts in the learner's own culture (Preilser, B. 1999:249). In this way, only the content is standard and the methods, strategies and goals are left up to the teacher or determined by the sub-domains specific needs.

Canagarajah proposes that in order to create a truly appropriate method, the deductive process must be reversed and an inductive (bottom to top) form of method generation be implemented. Beginning with teachers, context evaluation and strategy identification and ending in the development or selection of an appropriate format. His rationale for this stems from the premise that teachers will modify and customize any established method in order to suit their specific needs regardless of what is prescribed and that it is unlikely that any universally appropriate method will ever be achieved. The model he offers as "post method", involves the identification and development of dominant learning strategies. Canagarajah argues that strategies are generalizable and transferable across cultures but methods are not. He suggests starting with broad pedagogical principles which are specialized and modified as the context is explored and its unique

characteristics are discovered. Further support comes from the fact that, empirical research cannot put one method over another but merely provide insight into how certain approaches obtain various degrees of success in specific situations. Teachers should move away from using predetermined methods and rely on their own experience and intuition to determine what is appropriate. In order to make such an approach quantifiable and systematic, he consolidates these skills under a "strategy based" umbrella term. This "non method" approach which seeks to explore and describe what learners do, has the potential of a "context sensitive or community specific" model. In his case study, Canagarajah applies this approach to teaching writing and adapts new techniques based on the students learning styles and preferences. In this way he accommodates the diversity of potential cultures within a single class. He goes further to identify that learners require access to different cultures in order to develop a more complete competence. "It is far better to teach students the skills of negotiating languages and cultures than to make them accommodate to one language/culture at a time." (Canagarajah, S. 2002:146). In order to foster the development of these coping and negotiation strategies, he also exposes the learners to unfamiliar strategies and has them use strategies which are uncomfortable and counter to their traditional learning styles. Through this learners are able to develop a deeper awareness, discover limitations and exercise creativity and critical thinking. Canagarajah concludes that methods blind, limit and restrict teachers as to what they are able to do and to what is best for their specific context. Strategies on the other hand encourage exploration, sensitivity and accommodation as well as liberate teachers to pursue their own agenda, research or paradigm.

Although Canagarajah's post method, strategy based approach has universal potentiality, it does not fully escape the bonds of method based pedagogy. Without resorting to a form of chaos theory driven, or a random "everything is ok" approach, Canagarajah's model can not stand on its own. Such an approach requires some kind of benchmark or guidelines in order to be feasible and acceptable to teachers, students and administrators. How should teachers begin to use their experience and intuition effectively? How should new and inexperienced teachers be initiated into such a paradigm? How can teachers introduce strategies? What are the best means of raising awareness? How can any standards or levels of quality be established or maintained? How can any predictions about learning outcomes be made? To fully take advantage of this new found "post method" freedom, parameters are needed and perhaps a strategy based method is not entirely undesirable. I propose to further develop and expand Canagarajah's model extending it to include more specific elements within the realm of cultural negotiation as well as language and laying down a framework upon which meta-cultural skills and strategies common to both linguistic and nonlinguistic negotiation, navigation and success are introduced and developed to create an overall communicative, intercultural competence.

Returning to the questions proposed in the introduction, what are problems that all people face when engaging in another language and culture? Canagarajah identifies the need for learners to be reflexive and to develop meta-skills to make sense of the multiple domains and diverse contexts they will experience, but does not develop these further in a way that would truly take advantage of the resources available and provide a complete spectrum of communicative/ cultural competence and awareness. Canagarajah's model in fact, is limited to meta-linguistic and perhaps meta-cognitive awareness, leaving the essential meta - cultural component unexplored. It is nevertheless, the vast range and scope of meta-cultural strategies that possibly hold the key to developing an interculturally appropriate pedagogy and providing learners with the tools and awareness required to successfully communicate in today's world.

Compiling data from 30 individuals who had experienced living in several different cultures for extended periods of time, Van der Horst (1998)

identified cumulative qualities which would be invaluable in negotiating and coping with differences and difficulties as presented in various aspects of intercultural exchange, integration, interaction and communication. He labeled these as meta-cultural knowledge and described them as follows; "the ability to model, understand, and operate flexibly in the world in any given culture, the ability to learn how to learn, and the ability to create one's own appropriate context for living". He goes on to outline levels of competence in these skills as; "mastering the art of crossing over from one culture to another, becoming senior, transcendent, or "meta" to culture, learning the art of how to avoid becoming entangled in any of the presuppositions and value judgments of any single culture, learning what to do when, where, and with whom to be effective, productive, happy, and appropriate, sometimes regardless of, but always at the same time respecting the present cultural context." (Van der Horst, B. 1998:4). Some of the skills which might be developed as meta-cultural strategies superceding, complimenting and encompassing other strategic frameworks and models as they are applied and related to language learning processes are as follows: tolerance for ambiguity, low goal/task orientation, open-mindedness, non-judgmentalness, empathy, communicativeness, flexibility, adaptability, curiosity, warmth in human relationships, motivation, self-reliance, strong sense of self, tolerance for difference, perceptiveness, ability to fail. Although there are some significant differences between Canagarajah's strategies and the strategies which might be fostered by developing the above skills, the overall purpose is similar. In that Canagarajah aims to empower local teachers, open up the domain of pedagogy to learners, democratize the language classroom, allow learners to negotiate or shift between cultures, have teachers and learners be more reflective and critically aware of strategies and processes, develop meta - pedagogical, critical, "becoming appropriate" and overall cultural awareness's. By applying theses ideals and strategy goals to a framework, outlining what teachers might be able to

expect and accomplish, providing guidelines and suggested parameters, pooling general knowledge, experience and intuition gleaned from teacher-researchers' case studies across the board, both from periphery and western paradigms, a comprehensive and effective meta-skills development process can be created which will provide learners with the full spectrum of tools, knowledge and skills they will require to become competent navigators and negotiators of language and culture.

Tomic (1998) identifies the need for a "cultural re-thinking" in language teaching by considering Agars' (1994) concept of "Languaculture" which holds that language is only one aspect of communication and that intercultural awareness is at the heart of communicative competence. She goes on to describe how this might be developed into a critical pedagogy which can prepare learners cognitively and affectively for exploring other cultures. The applied aspects of this approach encompass Giroux's (1993) "pedagogy of difference" which encourages tolerance, exploration of identity, challenge of common sense and an overall transforming of the classroom from a mere instructional site to a rich pool of diversity, discovery and heightened awareness. This perception of difference as a resource rather than as an obstacle, is fundamental to the development of meta-cultural strategies and skills. The role of the teacher in such a pedagogy, would be as a guide and mentor, exploring, discovering and learning alongside the students. Rather than teaching about differences and how to cope and act appropriately, conflict, bias, inequality, communication breakdown and culture shock, should be experienced and recreated through critical incidents, role plays, simulations and other activities which will allow learners first hand, to use and develop the skills, tools and awareness which will enable them to be "shape shifters" and "post modern survivors" (Lifton, in Pederson, 1996). It is essential for present language education pedagogy to adequately prepare learners for the world they will encounter by providing more than just language tools. Considering individual needs, differences, cultures,

learning environments and paradigms, building on teachers knowledge and experience and compiling and analyzing strategies which are common across cultures, it should be possible to create a universal pedagogy and framework which integrates a diversity of skills, develops meta-cultural awareness and ultimately produces individuals, societies and a world which is truly, communicatively competent.

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# メタ文化スキルの攻略法と理解の展開

メタ文化アプローチの基礎

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## 概　　要

　言語相対性理論（1929）と Sapir － Whorf 仮説（1940）の理論の中で定義されてから、言語と文化の間の原因と結果に関係する固定観念は、応用と社会言語学での研究部門において重要であり続けている。これらの理論は、全ての言語の基本的構成要素が使用者の観点から分割できないという事に定まっており、それ故に、特定言語グループ視野世界での観点に影響される。現在この関連についての研究調査はどのように文化の違いが言語学習過程に影響を及ぼしているかについてより関心が向いており、世界的英語という事と学習者や状況の多様性に重点をおいた近年の傾向を考慮すると、着眼点は文化を理解する事への展開や第二言語習得での必要不可欠な構成要素での言語能力へと移行している。着実に勢いを増している海外旅行、世界経済、コミュニケーション・テクノロジーにおいてその見通しは、将来多くの人々が他の文化に頻繁かつ持続的な接触または体験をするという事だけではもはや十分とはいえない。現在において必要なものは、コミュニケーションと相互作用のより細かいニュアンスと特殊水準においての習得方法や誘導をもって学習者をアシストする、メタ・スキルとしてのより深い理解と包括力である。言葉以外でこの様なスキルが学習者にとって必要か。新しい文化や環境の一員となる時、全ての人々が抱える問題はどのようなことか。どの様な状況からこれらは指導され、身に付けられる事ができるのか。文化理解促進においての教師の役割とは何か。この論文は、前記の疑問についての答えを探りながら、関連した研究を批評し、様々な状況や方法を分析し、どのようなアプローチが今日の EFL 学習者のニーズや環境に最も適しているかを定めるよう試みたものである。終わりに、これらの特質についての見識や異文化間の適切な教育を可能にするであろうと思われる、いくつかの見解を提案したものである。