Cultural Elements in a Malaysian English Language Textbook.

ABSTRACT

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'Culture' in L2 today is undoubtedly much more than teaching the great works of literature. It has made inroads into the fields of applied linguistics and second language education as well. Societal values, attitudes and cultural elements are integrated with the communicative approach to enhance the effectiveness of L2 acquisition Conversely, textbooks are an integral part of language learning in the classrooms. Although presently there is a deluge of alternative instructional materials, textbooks are still very much relevant in ascertaining the content, methods and approaches, educational philosophy, linguistic and cultural information in the classrooms. Hence, it is the intent of this paper to examine the cultural elements in a form four English language textbooks currently used in Malaysian ESL classrooms in order to determine the most prominent cultural dimension portrayed. A more specific and operational definition of culture which outlines four dimensions or 'senses' of culture; the aesthetic, sociological, semantic and the pragmatic posited by Adaskou, Britten & Fahsi (1990) is used to facilitate the investigation in this descriptive study. These aspects are representative of the myriad dimensions of culture as well as providing concrete substance to the abstractness of culture.

Cultural Elements in Malaysian English Language Textbooks.

Introduction

There are many axioms reflecting the relationship between language and culture in the field of English Language Teaching (ELT) pedagogy. There are also various stands by a number of ELT educators regarding the place of culture in ESL. The positive implications of including cultural associations of the target language into instructional materials are largely known and accepted. This inclusion will nurture positive attitudes towards the target language, hence facilitating its acquisition. Generally, there is a tacit agreement that the assimilation of the target culture which results in acculturation will encourage communicative competence which in turn will enhance language learning. Therefore, cultural understanding should not be disregarded but should be in the heart of second language learning. Having established the cultural niche we have then moved on to the issue of what kind of cultural elements are introduced and integrated into ELT instructional materials specifically, textbooks, and how deliberate the infusion is. Studies in Malaysia, Korea, Morocco, Japan and Pakistan reported that cultural information is present in EFL textbooks. They revealed different portrayals of culture in all its dimensions. This paper discusses the cultural impact on Malaysian English Language teaching and learning as well as identifies the cultural dimensions found in a Malaysian English Language textbook.

The Theoretical Development of Culture in ESL Education.

In the earlier part of this century second language learning took place in order for learners to gain "access to the great literary masterpieces of civilization" (Allen, 1985). Learners were exposed to cultural experiences associated with the target language. In the sixties, another educational purpose for second language learning emerged - "crosscultural communication and understanding" (Nostrand in Lessard-Clouston, 1997). Culture then became essential not only for the study of

literature but more importantly for language learning where the term "small c culture" came into the picture. (Steele, 1989). This thought is further supported by the emergence of the communicative approach in language teaching which promotes the integration of language and culture. (Canale and Swain, 1980). This is translated into the goal of communication within the cultural context of the target language which in turn should encourage communicative competence.   The relationship between language, society and culture is further explained through the domain of sociolinguistics which examines language use within different social contexts. In relation to this language use includes the social functions of language and the forms these functions take in the evocation of social meaning as people's lives, opinions and beliefs are strongly influenced by the society they live in.

Although sociolinguists have a common concern in examining the relationship between language, society and culture, there exist various interpretations of the meanings of these terms. However, they do agree on the principle that there exists an inextricable bond between language and culture.

Stern (1983) posits the cultural aspect of second language and foreign language teaching in his three-level framework.   The foundational level incorporate linguistics, educational, anthropology, sociology and sociolinguistics theories. Ethnographic or cultural description of the target language is the essence of the inter-level or level two while the sociocultural component of the target language is the foundation for level three. In Stern's conceptual framework language, culture and communication is synonym with society. Therefore like many other conceptual frameworks it also emphasizes the inclusion of culture in ESL education.

The Role of Culture in ESL Education.

This section discusses some of the arguments posited in support of developing second language learners' intercultural competence.   This is in line with globalization where second language learners are increasingly exposed to the global community in which English plays a role as an international bridge.

Learners who are fully competent in the language are expected to be global performers well versed in the cultural awareness embedded in the international language in their quest for knowledge as well as fostering global relations.

The closeness of the relationship between language and culture gives rise to the perception of language as a kind of acculturation (Ellis, 1985; Puente, 1997; Gieve, 1999) where language learners assimilate new culture, "new codes of expression, new values, and new norms of conduct" as well as a different world view. (Puente, 1997). Fantini (1997) asserts that "language reflects and affects culture" forming a "dynamic relation" or intrinsic link. This link is manifested in what Fantini terms "linguaculture" where language is inextricably linked with culture and in turn is taught in tandem with its culture. In relation to this, Malaysian English Language learners need to learn about the target language culture together with Malaysian culture in order to communicate effectively, achieving communicative competence. Communicative competence is not possibly achieved without cultural understanding as it is the core of language acquisition. This is demonstrated in the fact that when a learner decides to learn a language, such as German, the learner is not only learning the linguistics of German but everything else German and Germany. Therefore, learning the linguistics of a language involves assimilating cultural associations and all its cultural load. A learner then avoids all the pitfalls of cultural misunderstanding or ignorance which leads to the breakdown of communication. In addition to communication, learners who are said to have acquired a language are those who are able to align themselves with the culture of the target language. They can also think in the target language thus enabling them to identify with the language by capturing the essence of the language.(Tang, 1999)

It is mentioned earlier that Malaysian ESL learners need to learn about the culture of the target language together with Malaysian culture assimilated into the target language. Accordingly, intercultural understanding should then be emphasized in ESL education in Malaysia. Intercultural understanding means dual culture understanding where learners are exposed to the target language

culture, specifically English and to a certain extent, American culture as well as being introduced to Malaysian culture in English. Learners are given plenty of exposure to cultural information of the target language . This exposure to the target language culture is to minimize what Schulman (in Ellis,1985) termed as social and psychological distance in his Nativization model where he posited that language learning may be hindered by social and psychological distance. Social distance refers to the equality of the social status of each culture, the integrative and instrumental motivation in learning the additional linguaculture which in turn affects the attitude of the learner towards second language learning. Psychological distance is realized in language and culture shock, motivation and ego boundaries of individual learners'. Therefore, social and psychological distance extensively influence learners' attitude, whether positive of negative, towards the target language and its culture. A positive attitude will facilitate language learning as it promotes affinity with the linguaculture. In contrast if learners feel alienated from the target language and culture, language learning is certainly hampered by this cultural gap.

It is also essential to bridge this gap as it could pose difficulties in communication. especially when the second language learners come into direct contact with target language culture. This gap can be seen in the example of the 'be' verb. The 'be' verb is not found in Malay therefore Malay ESL learners have a tendency to produce linguistically erroneous sentences such as "she sad" or "they rich" omitting the 'be' verbs. Misassumptions about the conceptual systems of the two languages, such as that every word of the mother tongue has an equivalent in the target language will result in linguistic errors which will surely impede communication. The difference in the conceptual systems of English with Malay, Chinese and Tamil languages are very much apparent in the tense system. The Malay, Chinese and Tamil languages do not have tense systems. Past events are not marked by the past tenses. On the contrary the English tense system conceptualizes how the English perceive time as a linear flow which is delineated into categories through the use of tense. In the Malay, Chinese and Tamil culture,

time is rationalized through the aspectual systems where time or events are perceived as relative to other events in the discourse.

In the pragmatic dimension, confusion could occur due to the ignorance of cultural information. Learners need to be aware of ambiguity in some functions of the target language such as in the classic example of the statement 'It's cold'. The statement can function both as a general comment on the weather and a request for the window to be opened. If an ESL learner does not recognize the hidden meaning, communication is surely lost. In addition to this, learners need to be informed about culturally accepted attitude and behaviour in the target language. The Asian way of reacting to praise or compliments with reticence and humility might cause cultural misunderstanding in the target culture. Consequently, cultural contexts in all its dimension should be introduced in ELT education in order to achieve communicative competence.

Lack of cross-cultural awareness will lead to misunderstandings in second language classrooms. Some 'improper' classroom behaviour may stem from culturally specific behaviour. Many rules and procedures for effective classroom interaction is dictated by culture. (Powel and Andersen, 1994). It is not surprising that a female Muslim learner will not often volunteer to lead a group when there are other Muslim male learners in the group. This is the consequence of her up-bringing which recognizes the leading role of a male Muslim. She will often avoid direct eye-contact with a male teacher when responding to a question as direct eye-contact with a person of the opposite sex, is undesirable in the Islamic context, especially when not related. (Syahrom, 1995). The learner may be upbraided for breaching the ideals of effective communication which emphasizes eye-contact in interaction by a teacher who is not well-versed with cross-cultural understanding. This lack of understanding has serious implications because it affects classroom management and consequently the teaching and learning process. Teachers need to reflect on their cultural judgement and adjust their world-view in the light of these cultural constraints. They have to localize certain aspects of culture by adopting the target language culture without neglecting local cultural values. This

is in line with McLeod (1985:540) who asserts, " It is important for the teacher to understand the values he is transmitting and also the values of the students' cultures."

Textbooks and Culture

A discussion on textbooks is inevitable in light of the arguments advocating the infusion of culture in ESL education. The significance of textbooks are seen in the many roles textbooks play in facilitating the second language teaching and learning process in the classroom. According to Cortazzi and Jin (1999), the textbook "can be a teacher, a map, a resource, a trainer, an authority, a de-skiller and an ideology." Hence, the textbook can be a major source of cultural elements beside providing linguistic and topical contents which necessarily reflect the ideology inherent in the ESL context of a particular circle. Textbooks across the world are of different cultural orientations; whether they are based on source cultures, target culture or international target cultures. Source cultures refer to learners'own culture, target culture is the culture in which the target language is used as a first language while international target cultures refer to various cultures in English, or non-English-speaking countries which use English as an international language. (Cortazzi and Jin, 1999). Consequently, this categorization will assist in describing the cultural orientation of the textbook in this study.

Related Studies

This section will review related studies on ESL and EFL texts and textbooks carried out in order to examine cultural dimensions and their related concerns.

Norrizan (1993) set out to find out the impact of various cultural elements in ESL texts introduced during ESL lessons to two sets of students in two different schools in Malaysia. She compared a school in Community A with middle or upper middle class students and Community B which was an urban

village with low income families. She used a cultural unit matrix which include culturally suggestive topical items such as types of houses, overseas studies , satay, business loans, travels, air travels and local festivals among others. These items were selected from a survey of six form four ESL textbooks referred to or used by the teachers in the study. Classroom observations and interviews were carried out to determine whether the topical items are culturally familiar or unfamiliar to the students. She found out that many of the topical items were culturally relevant to students who came from middle or upper middle class families in Community A. She concluded that the textbooks were biased towards middle-class values and lifestyles. Thus, meaningful interactions were achieved in these classrooms. Conversely, students in Community B were very distracted and restless during these lessons. She proposed that teachers should be more selective in choosing appropriate items according to the learners' culture. It is concluded that culturally familiar items do facilitate second language learning.

Despite misgivings about the inclusion of Western culture in English Language teaching, Shimako, 2000 (in McKay, 2004) found that many of the textbooks adopted in Japan do include Western characters and values although Japanese culture was predominant. Foreign cultures were almost always in the context of Western visitors being introduced to Japanese culture by the locals. Generally, American culture is the main culture representing Western values and characters.

In the Korean English as a Foreign language (EFL) context, the teaching and learning of culture encompasses all aspects of human life: lifestyle, behaviour, thoughts and the value system of the target culture. Learners are made aware of the various dimensions of culture as well as the rules of the language. It is found that the most frequently appeared topics related to culture in the Korean English textbook for secondary schools are food, holidays, gestures, weather, customs and travel to English speaking countries. The predominant concept of culture is 'culture as the way of life' which is the sociological sense of culture.

The aesthetic dimension of culture, culture as a way of thinking and behaviour do not seem to be taken into consideration.

In Chile, the cultural focus is Chilean own culture and country. The Ministry of Education has designed a series of textbooks for the public schools entitled Go for Chile (Mugglestone, Elsworth, and Rose 1999, 2000 in McKay, 2004) that carries out the Ministry's learning objectives. Thus the book deals with places in Chile and the various local issues. Characters portrayed are of many nationalities but typical Western values on gender roles are also depicted where we have typically the portrayals of professional mothers who work outside the home.

In their study of teaching materials in Moroccan secondary schools Adaskou, Britten, and Fahsi (1990) found nothing beneficial or motivating in including Western culture. By introducing Western culture there's a tendency for cultural comparison which in turn will breed discontent among learners with their own culture. Besides, certain patterns of behaviour in English-speaking social contexts are not desirable, being incompatible with local values. Finally, the teachers in the study believe that motivation in learning English will improve if the language is presented in contexts relevant to learners' lives as young adults rather than in the context of an English-speaking country. Adaskou, Britten, and Fahsi (1990) also maintains that the inclusion of a cultural component in language teaching can improve international understanding, enhance appreciation of one's own culture, facilitate learners' visits to foreign countries and contacts with their people, and motivate learners.

Generally in the textbooks of these nations, the Western characters are used to introduce stereotypes presenting differences between Western culture and local cultures. They also portray issues of gender roles and all of them appear in textbooks approved by the local Ministry of Education. Along the same line, it is the intention of the present study to explore the cultural dimensions and describe the cultural contexts in a Malaysian Secondary Four English Language textbook.

The Study

Objective of The Study

This is a very small scale descriptive study on a Malaysian form four English Language textbook currently in use. It sets out to identify or determine the most prominent cultural dimension found in this textbook. It also intends to describe the cultural contexts portrayed.

Research Question

What is the most prominent cultural dimension portrayed in a Form Four Malaysian English Language textbook; the aesthetic, sociological, semantic or the pragmatic (sociolinguistic)?

The Conceptual Framework

A specific and operational definition of culture which outlines four dimensions or 'senses' of culture; the aesthetic, sociological, semantic and the pragmatic posited by Adaskou, Britten & Fahsi (1990) is adapted to be used to facilitate the investigation. These aspects are representative of the myriad dimensions of culture as well as providing concrete substance to the abstractness of culture. It should be mentioned here that the analysis of cultural component in this study does not include the prescribed literary texts integrated into the ESL syllabus by the Ministry of Education. The Literature in English Component covers five selected poems and short stories which is a deliberate attempt to include culture within the Malaysian English Language curriculum. This component conforms to the 'literature component' within Adaskou, Britten and Fahsi's (1990) framework for aesthetic sense. However, the analysis will cover any other literary texts not listed in the syllabus.

It should be mentioned that although this framework was developed for an EFL context, it is found to be compatible to Malaysian ESL context which

resembles EFL in the psychological distance of L2 in the majority of learners. It is also appropriate as a framework for studies on non-native speakers.

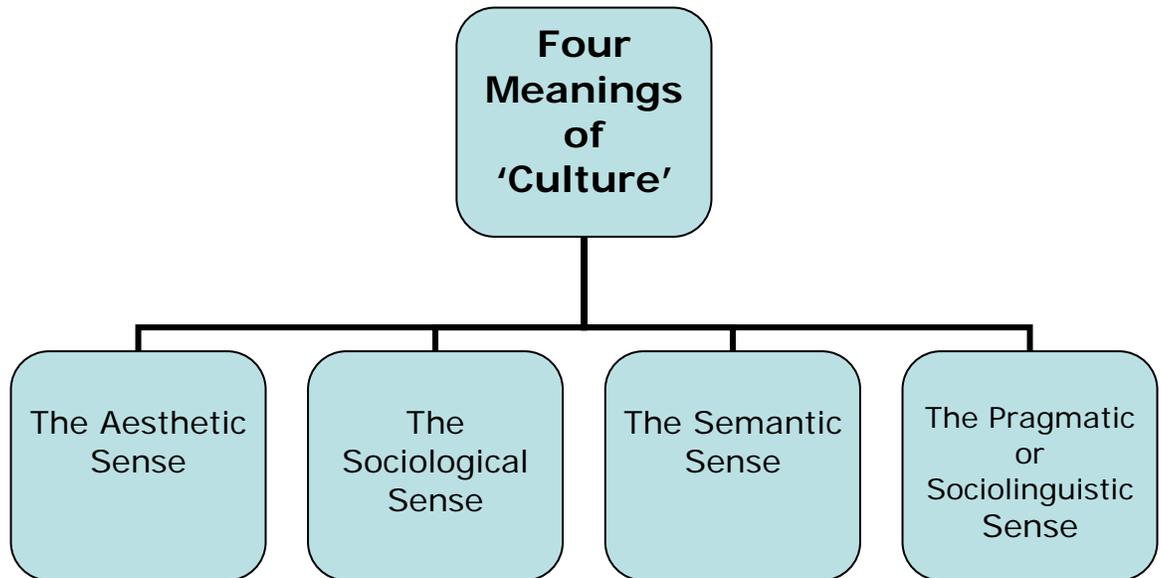**Figure 1 - Four meanings of 'culture' : Adaskou, Britten and Fahsi (1990)**

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                    │     of      │
                    │  'Culture'  │
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│ The Aesthetic ││     The      ││ The Semantic ││ The Pragmatic│
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Figure 2- The Aesthetic Sense

The Aesthetic Sense
Culture with a capital C: the media, the cinema, music (whether serious or popular, literature- the study of which used often to be one of the main reasons for language teaching. Many of these forms of culture are at the same time sources of information on culture in our second sense.

Figure 3- The Sociological Sense

The Sociological Sense
Culture with a small C: the organization and nature of family, of home life, of interpersonal relations, material conditions, work and leisure, customs and institution.

Figure 4- The Semantic Sense

The Semantic Sense
The conceptual system embodied in the language, conditioning all our perceptions and our thought processes, time and space relations, emotional states, colours.

Figure 5 - The Pragmatic (sociolinguistic) Sense

The Pragmatic (or sociolinguistic) Sense
The background knowledge, social skills, and paralinguistic skills that, in addition to mastery of the language code, make possible successful communication: • The ability to use appropriate exponents of the various communicative functions • The ability to conform to norms of politeness, where different from the learners' culture, including taboo avoidance • Awareness of conventions governing interpersonal relations- questions of status, obligation, licence, where different from the learners' culture • Familiarity with the main rhetorical conventions in different written genres eg, different types of letters and messages, form-filling, advertisements.

The Textbook Sample

KBSM English Form 4. (Penerbit Megasetia Sdn.Bhd., 2002)

Procedure

Examination of the four cultural dimensions adapted from Adaskou, Britten and Fahsi (1990) is carried out on the textbook sample. The written text in the textbook is scrutinized looking out for language discourse which suggests and

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conforms to the cultural dimensions in the conceptual framework. Text analysis is carried out drawing attention to :

- Informative or descriptive text material
- Texts presenting foreign attitudes and opinions
- Human-interest texts (including dialogues), authentic of fictitious, with details of everyday life
- Contextualized practice activities, writing tasks
- Lexis- particularly idioms – and unfamiliar collocations, which involve alien concepts
- The exponents of the communicative function

(Adapted from Adaskou, Britten and Fahsi (1990)

Cultural information can be effectively communicated through this particular analysis thus it is adopted and adapted to facilitate the study.

During the analysis any textual discourse with cultural loads are recorded in a tally sheet in order to gauge the distribution and frequency of occurrence of the four cultural dimensions. The frequency of occurrence of each dimension of culture is then converted to percentages for comparison purposes.   These percentages are then analyzed to determine the dimension which occurs the most frequently. The findings are then presented in tables and visuals. The findings are later justified and discussed qualitatively to address the research question.

Findings And Discussion

Figure 6: Distribution of Culture Distinctive Occurrences Across Chapters

The Aesthetic Sense	**The Sociological Sense**	**The Semantic Sense**	**The Pragmatic (or sociolinguistic) Sense**
7 chapters	8 chapters	5 chapters	12 chapters

Figure 7: The Ranking And Percentages of Culture Distinctive Occurrences Across Chapters

Ranking	Cultural Dimension	No. of Chapters	Percentage %
1	The Pragmatic (or sociolinguistic) Sense	12	80.0
2	The Sociological Sense	8	53.3
3	The Aesthetic Sense	7	46.6
4	The Semantic Sense	5	33.3

Culture distinctive occurrences are found to be spread across fifteen chapters of the textbook. (Figure 6). The pragmatic or sociolinguistic sense is found in twelve out of fifteen (80%) of the chapters. The sociological sense is found in eight chapters or 53.3%,the aesthetic sense is found in seven chapters (46.6%) and the semantic sense in five chapters which is 33.3%. Therefore, the pragmatic or sociolinguistic sense of culture spans over almost all fifteen chapters of the textbook followed by the sociological sense, the aesthetic sense and finally the semantic sense.

The pragmatic(sociolinguistic) occurrences are quite predominant probably because the forms and functions of language such as 'to offer', 'to clarify' and 'to request' are included in almost all the chapters. According to Adaskou, Britten and Fahsi, 1990, the pragmatic(sociolinguistic) sense includes 'the ability to use various exponents of communicative functions." Another probable reason is the rhetorical conventions in different written genres for example, types of letters, are introduced in the sub-section of the textbook on the writing skill which is found in every chapter of the textbook. This could imply that the textbook conforms to the communicative language teaching approach which is the generally accepted ESL ideology in Malaysia.

Figure 8: Frequency of Culture Distinctive Occurrences

The Aesthetic Sense	The Sociological Sense	The Semantic Sense	The Pragmatic (or sociolinguistic) Sense
21	35	28	21

Figure 9: The Ranking, Frequencies And Percentages of Culture Distinctive Occurrences.

Ranking	Cultural Dimension	Frequency	Percentage %
1	The Sociological Sense	35	33.3
2	The Semantic Sense	28	26.7
3	The Aesthetic Sense	21	20.0
	The Pragmatic (or sociolinguistic) Sense	21	20.0
	Total	105	100

Based on Figure 9, it is clear that the sociological sense of culture tops the rank with 35 occurrences or 33.3% of the total culture distinctive occurrences found in the textbook. This is followed by the semantic sense with 28 occurrences or 26.7%. The aesthetic sense and the pragmatic(sociolinguistic) sense both fall third in the rank with 21 occurrences or 20%. Therefore it is concluded that the sociological sense is the most prominent cultural dimension in the textbook.

This finding is equivalent to the findings in the Korean study where almost all the culture distinctive occurrences are sociological in nature. However, in this study it is found that though sociological dimension is prominent the other three dimensions of culture; the semantic, the aesthetic and the pragmatic(sociolinguistic)senses are not totally neglected (Figure 9).

It is also found that the characters portrayed in this textbook are mostly local characters from the different ethnic groups. Even the travel destinations are strictly local but there is a mention of a holiday in Hong Kong, an Asian country. This is suggestive of the unique role of English in Malaysia not only for communication with people from English-speaking countries, native speakers and visitors but also for interaction among English-speaking Malaysians. It is interesting to note that in the Malaysian ESL context, English is a vehicle to convey local cultural information in all its four dimensions: the aesthetic, the sociological, the semantic and the pragmatic(sociolinguistic) senses. In this respect perhaps it is not too far from the truth to suggest that English plays a significant role in developing the Malaysian cultural identity especially the urban Malaysian sub-culture.

Implications.

It is observed that the cultural focus or content of this textbook is local culture or 'localized culture' made up of the cultures of the various ethnic groups in Malaysia. In line with this, the cultural orientation of this textbook is based on the source cultures in which there is a direct and explicit inclusion of local culture such as found in the passages explaining about local festivals and dances. There is also an attempt to introduce intercultural behaviour and communication but it is confined to the cultures of the ethnic groups in Malaysia. No instances of comparison with western or target language culture are found. In this respect the ESL context in Malaysia is extended to English as an international language (EIL) context as it is used to describe local culture and values to other global speakers of English. In conclusion the Malaysian English Language textbook examined does subscribe to the assumption that language is culture hence the inclusion of culture is beneficial to language proficiency. Therefore the Malaysian ELT idealogy on culture is successfully translated into the cultural occurrences in the textbook investigated in this study.

Limitations

As mentioned earlier, this is a very small scale study with just one textbook as samples. Therefore it is not the intent of this study to generalize its findings. The scope of the study is only confined to the analysis of written text . It does not consider illustrations and other visuals, tapescripts of listening texts, sound recordings, realia and pseudo-realia of all sorts.

Conclusion

It is a fact that English has become an international language therefore it doesn't belong only to native speakers in English-speaking countries. It has truly belong to the world as the global lingua franca of this century. Second language speakers of English use English to communicate not only with native speakers of English but with other second language or foreign language users of English. The rapid and extensive localization and nativization of English (Yano,2001) suggests that English need not always be linked to the culture of those who speak it as a first language. Indeed the purpose of an international language is to describe one's own culture and concerns to others.(McKay, 2004). The findings in the studies reviewed in this paper reveal that, in many countries, the teaching of English is becoming much more localized, integrating local flavours with those of the target culture. The use of local characters, places, and issues as the content for textbooks are subtly interspersed with the cultural contexts of English-speaking countries. This is a necessity as language could not be totally divorced from culture. The adoption of English as a second language means to a certain extent the acceptance of Western culture and values. As Smith (1976) proposed thirty years ago, only when English is used to express and advocate local culture and values will it truly represent an international language.

Clearly, ESL and EFL educators support the inclusion of a cultural component in the teaching of English. Therefore the issue now is not whether to

include but what aspects of culture to include, what role culture should play and more importantly how culture should be taught in the teaching of English as a second language.

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APPENDIX: EXAMPLES OF CULTURE DISTINCTIVE OCCURENCES ACROSS THE FOUR DIMENSIONS OF CULTURE

The Aesthetic Sense	The Sociological Sense	The Semantic Sense	The Pragmatic (or sociolinguistic) Sense
*Malay Joget, sumazau, candle dance, bhangra, Indian classical dance	*Organization of work and leisure-sportsmanship.-Sepang F1	*Asian value of hard work equals success depicted in Chef Wan and Datuk Lat	*Functions of language: to offer clarification, to request
	*Interpersonal	*The spirit of	*Rhetorical

*Gawai Festival, Hari raya puasa, syawal- 'time of prayers, reflection and charity

*Poem 'Do you mind?' by Eric Finney, 'I told a lie today.'

*Excerpts from short stories

*Musical heritage- gamelan, court dances, kompang

*guests exchange verses (berbalas pantun), quoting poetry | relations- international day for Senior citizens

*Holidays and travel – local travel destinations- sabah, endau-rompin

*Holidays and travel – Hong Kong

*Value – respect for the elderly

*Open House- respect, unity, understanding, co-existence

*Family institution- value - elder siblings minding younger ones | 'Malaysia boleh' – "they dare to dream, age is no barrier

*Malaysian food - associated with socializing – stall, eating places.

*Indigenous people have special relationship- rainforest

*Multifaceted culture, ethnic communities equals integration, harmony | conventions, different written genres

*Rhetorical conventions- formal and informal letters.

*Functions of language: politeness, Great idea! Thanks |

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