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**DEVELOPING ENGLISH COMMUNICATION  
SKILLS IN A DIFFERENT CULTURAL CONTEXT:  
MATCHES AND MISMATCHES**

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# Developing English Communication Skills in a Different Cultural Context: Matches and Mismatches

Nicoleta-Mariana IFTIMIE<sup>1</sup>

## Abstract

*It is common knowledge that from among all the languages in the world, English has acquired the status of 'lingua franca', i.e., the language that is used in international communication across countries, the language that enables people of different ethnic, national and cultural backgrounds to share with others their ideas and cultures. The use of English as an international language has resulted in a growing number of people who learn and speak this language all over the world. This has important consequences for English language teaching practices, which need to aim at developing the learners' social and professional communication skills, while catering for the dimension of intercultural communication, placed against the local cultural-educational context.*

*This paper shares the author's experience of developing the students' communication skills by means of oral presentation projects in two parts of the world in which English is taught as a foreign language – Romania and Taiwan. After a brief literature review, the study compares and contrasts the two different contexts of learning. The last part of the paper presents the methodological choices made in order to reconcile the global requirement of developing the students' communicative competence with the local issues connected to the host culture complex.*

*While most of the studies concerned with the teaching of English as Foreign Language in the Asia Pacific region offer either the point of view of the source culture teacher or that of the target culture (native speaker of English) teacher, this paper presents the perspective of a non-native teacher of English who belongs to a third culture.*

## Keywords:

*communication skills, Communicative Language Teaching, culture of learning, culture sensitive methodology, oral presentations.*

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### **Introduction**

During the last decades, English has acquired the status of the most widely taught non-native language in contemporary society, and the most widely used language in international communication for business, technical or scientific purposes. Kachru (1989) proposes a tripartite model meant to account for the spread of English and its role in different parts of the world. The model is made up of three concentric circles: the *inner circle*, that includes those countries where English is the primary language, the *outer circle* countries, made up of former colonies, in which English has the status of second language, and the *expanding circle*, where English is studied as a foreign language. The number of people in outer circle countries or expanding circle countries who learn English as a second or foreign language has increased so fast that at present the nonnative speakers of English outnumber the native speakers from the inner circle.

The spread of English has resulted in a growing number of people who study and use this language all over the world. If in the past the teaching of English was approached mainly from a 'technical', less contextualized perspective, the past thirty years have witnessed the publication of studies, article and books that relate the teaching/learning of English to the concept of culture and to the context in which this process takes place: classroom culture, school or university culture, educational system, society in general. The teaching of a foreign language is related to culture from various perspectives: the culture the target language belongs to; the culture(s) the teacher and the students belong to; the socio-cultural context in which the teaching/learning process takes place.

### **Literature review**

The global spread of English has important implications for teaching practices, which need to cater for the dimension of intercultural communication (intelligibility and standardization), as well as for local issues connected to the host culture complex. Holliday (1994: 15-16) views the classroom as the locus of a complex web of cultures: the students with their previous learning experience and expectations; the teachers with their educational background, training, experience and teaching philosophy; the materials used, their content and inherent methodologies; the publishers that offer materials to be used in the

classroom; the host institution; the host educational environment, influenced by the local and national professional-academic culture (the ministry of education, various agencies), the national culture, the international-related cultures. All these factors combine to create what may be called a *culture of learning*, i.e. various expectations, beliefs, attitudes and behaviors that influence what happens in the classroom. In Cortazzi and Jin's opinion, the *culture of learning* is "part of the hidden curriculum" which shows that "much behavior in the language classroom is set within a taken-for-granted framework of expectations, attitudes, values, and beliefs about what constitutes good learning, about how to teach or learn..." (1996: 169)

Understanding a new culture of learning is the teacher's first step in trying to use appropriate methodology and select or create suitable materials for particular classes.

There are many studies that compare and contrast Western and Eastern (Chinese, Japanese) cultures of learning, mostly from a unilateral perspective- that of native teachers on host cultures. Cortazzi and Jin (1996) contrast the Western teachers' and the Chinese students' perceptions on expected learner behavior in class. Thus, while Western teachers value students' volunteering in class and consider it a proof of interest and active participation, Chinese students regard such practices as showing off; group discussions and other kinds of group work activities are considered by native English speaking teachers important in building up a team spirit and encouraging collaboration, whereas Chinese and Japanese students seem to regard such activities as pointless and a waste of time.

Flowerdew and Miller (quoted in McKay, 2002) consider that the differences in approach and methodology between Chinese and Western lectures are due to the different sets of values promoted by Confucian and Western culture, respectively. Confucian way of thinking emphasizes hard work and modesty, while the Western one places value on individual development, self-confidence and self-expression. In the Chinese approach to learning motivation comes from family and pressure to excel, while in Western culture motivation comes from within, from one's desire to develop and be creative. Confucian culture stresses the authority of the lecturer or teacher, who should not be questioned or interrupted, as these are signs of disrespect; in Western

culture, where the teacher is mainly a facilitator and a guide, questions, comments or other opinions are welcomed, as they are signs of interest.

When the context is Asian and the English teacher is a native speaker, oppositions may occur because of the different notions of what represents classroom learning and acceptable classroom behavior. From the point of view of the students, the teaching methods should remain the traditional, expected ones, while from the point of view of the native English speaking teacher the communicative approach should be accommodated with. The classrooms are characterized as “silent” and the students “reticent to speak” (Lee, & Ng, 2010). This stereotype view comes from the dichotomy East-West, where Western models are taken as standards of behavior.

Given the complexity of social and cultural factors that are at play in any English teaching situation, Holliday (1994: 1-2) argues that “any methodology in English language education should be appropriate to the social context within which it is to be used”.

When local teachers simply “import” methods and approaches that were devised initially for other contexts-of-learning, or when English speaking teachers use methods they are familiar with in a new context without first investigating that culture of learning, problems may appear. An example is the implementation of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) in Hong Kong in the 1980’s, at the special recommendation of the Curriculum Development Committee. Citing research findings from Evans (1997), Leung (1987) and Sze (1992), Tong (2004) concludes that “[a]lthough the CLT has been popular in some parts of the world, e.g. language schools in Britain, Australasia and North America, its effectiveness in Hong Kong is in doubt.” Following Cortazzi and Jin (1996), Tong attributes this state of affairs to the ‘Chinese culture of learning’ in which the concept of ‘face’ plays an important part and volunteering for an answer is equated with ‘showing off’.

Similar problems have been reported by native speakers of English when trying to implement Western approaches, such as CLT in the Chinese EFL classroom (Simpson, 2008). The two philosophies that are in conflict are those underlying CLT, as an expression of Western culture, based on the ideals of equality and individualism and the Traditional Chinese Method (TCM), as an expression of Chinese traditional values, based on hierarchical relations and collectivist values.

The simple translation on foreign soil of Western methods without considering the host culture complex may lead to conflict, frustration and baffled expectations on both sides. Simpson suggests that the solutions to the problem might be a better collaboration between Western and local teachers, a better understanding of the host culture complex and step-by-step changes. While the idea of collaboration between local and Western teachers seems rewarding, Simpson proves to be somewhat biased and patronizing when speaking about the “proven successes of the Western pedagogy (linguistically and culturally)” and the “constraints of the Chinese EFL context” (2008: 389).

Holliday considers that the dichotomy East-West oversimplifies the problem, since “it is not simply a Western-non-Western problem, because it is sometimes difficult to implement the methodology in continental Europe” (1994: 11-12). What he advocates for is a “culture-sensitive methodology”, which should be informed about and should take into account the classroom culture.

### **Two Contexts of Learning**

This section of the paper presents two different contexts of learning – Romania and Taiwan - and advocates for a methodology meant to develop the students’ speaking skills which takes into account the main characteristics of the teaching situation.

The main goals of foreign language education in Romanian high schools consist in acquiring and developing the communicative competence necessary for contextually adequate and socially accepted communication through the acquisition of specific knowledge, skills and attitudes, at levels which are equivalent with those established by the *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages*. The English high school curriculum includes general competencies, specific competencies, as well as values and attitudes. While the curriculum is developed by the Ministry of Education in terms of recommended topics, communicative functions and structures, the teachers themselves (sometimes in collaboration with the local educational authorities) have the liberty to select the textbook they are going to use. Most of these textbooks show an adherence to the communicative approach to language teaching: authentic texts and tasks, information gap activities, problem solving tasks, simulations and little attention paid to grammar. At the end of the high school years, Romanian students pass a national school leaving

examination. Assessment of foreign language proficiency is also part of this examination: students are evaluated in all the four skills (reading, writing, listening and speaking), according to a yardstick devised in conformity with the *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages* (Council of Europe, 2001). However, since the proficiency level does not count in the final grade, the washback effect is extremely poor. Romanian students who are enrolled in a university (with the exception of those who study philology) attend a foreign language course (usually English, French, or German) for two years. As a result of their past exposure to the communicative approach, Romanian students are generally fluent in oral communication, but not very accurate in either speech or writing. Most of them like working in pairs or groups and are confident enough to express their own ideas to the whole class. However, although speaking as a skill has been developed in high school, most freshmen are unaccustomed to speaking in front of an audience and oral presentations techniques are generally unknown to them.

Taiwanese society places a great emphasis on education, which, as Yakovleva points out, is considered “the key to success in life” (2013: 275). From among the various disciplines, English has acquired special status. In 1968, English became a compulsory subject in junior high school. In 2001, the Ministry of Education introduced a reform in English education policy, deciding that English should become a mandatory subject earlier, in the fifth grade of elementary school. The English curriculum establishes as its priorities the achievement of communicative ability, cultivate interest in English, gain understanding of other cultures and respect for cultural differences. Although the English curriculum for secondary education in Taiwan shows a propensity towards CLT and many textbooks embody its principles, what happens in the classroom and how the materials are used may be another matter. There are many other factors that have a say here, apart from the textbooks: the teachers, with their own teaching styles and teaching philosophy; the students, with their previous language learning experience, expectations and learning goals; the schools themselves, which tend to keep traditional values and beliefs.

One thing that puzzled me when I started teaching in a Taiwanese university was the fact that the students never volunteered for an answer: they responded only when nominated by the teacher and, even in that case, they gave short answers, which were sometimes

difficult to understand because they were not loud enough. In order to find out more about my students' past (pre-university) English language experience, I made a small-scale study (49 respondents), using two main instruments of investigation: questionnaires and interviews (Iftimie, 2006). The results obtained support observations made in the literature on the so-called 'Chinese culture of learning': an examination-driven education system (starting with junior school), whose main purpose is to acquire knowledge through hard work, preference for teacher-fronted activities, heavy weight on grammar and reading activities. However, quite surprisingly, the same students expressed their preference for what Willing (1988) calls "communicative" and "concrete" learning styles<sup>2</sup>, by rating on top places "I enjoy learning English by listening to foreign language speakers", "I enjoy learning English by watching pictures, movies and videos", "I like to learn English by talking in pairs", and "In class I like to learn by conversations".

### **Developing Communication Skills through Oral Presentations**

Starting from the idea that university graduates will be involved in many international professional interactions during which they will have to present ideas and support them with facts, figures, reasons, it goes without saying that they need not only possess excellent professional qualifications and practical abilities, but also good English communication skills, in order to be able to present their point of view in an efficient, clear, fluent and well organized manner.

Oral presentation projects bring many benefits to the learners and the learning environment. Thus, they help students learn (while gathering information for their oral presentation projects the students acquire new information; they foster the learners' autonomy and responsibility (the students choose the topic of their presentation, they gather information, decide on a pattern of presentation, design their visuals); c) they contribute to the building of a team spirit (the students work in small groups and the success of the project depends on

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<sup>2</sup> Willing (1988) distinguishes four main learning profiles: *concrete* learners, who like pictures, movies, videos, games, talking in pairs; *communicative* learners, who like to learn by listening to native speakers; *authority-oriented* learners, who like the teacher to explain everything, like grammar and reading; *analytical* learners, who like to read newspapers and study alone, working on tasks set by the teacher.

everybody's work); d) they foster the students' creativity; e) oral presentation projects have a tangible end-product (slides, a poster, handouts); f) they offer a break from the usual class routine (the students go out into the world to gather information, administer questionnaires, interview people). As mentioned earlier, the implementation of oral presentations in the Romanian university I have been teaching at has not been a problem, although only few students had used this type of activity before. In Taiwan I was quite surprised to find out that students had already used project work in the form of oral presentations for other disciplines, as well as for English. My experience and the students' attitude and behavior regarding the implementation of project work in Taiwan were completely different from the one recalled by King (2002) who claims that the idea of oral presentations is met with either silence or grumbles in Taiwanese universities.

### Stages

In order to implement oral presentation skills in a non-threatening manner, I had first a discussion concerning oral presentations with each group of students, bringing to the fore their past experience of such activities in school and university. This discussion led to the description of the main types of delivery (manuscript, memorized, extemporaneous and impromptu), with their pluses and minuses. An agreement was reached to use the extemporaneous type – a presentation which is planned carefully, but is not read or learned by heart. At this stage the number of students in each group (2-3), the type of end product (PP presentation) and the general theme (*Science and Technology* or *Student Life* in the case of Romanian engineering students and *Our University* or *Celebrations* in the case of Taiwanese students) were also discussed.

The next step consisted in approaching the aspects that were going to be graded: natural delivery (voice, rate of speech, eye contact, nonverbal and paraverbal elements), content (suited to the audience and time limit), organization (introduction, body, and conclusion), language (accuracy and fluency), and visual materials. Students were shown some short videos and were asked to write a series of guidelines for delivering effective presentations. At this point, both Romanian and Taiwanese students were made aware that such guidelines (especially those regarding nonverbal and paraverbal elements) are culture bound: while

being true for Western culture, elements such as eye contact with the audience may not be (entirely) true for other parts of the world. The following step was choosing the presentation title, which had to be related to the time limit and to the characteristics of the audience. Having decided on the title, the students could pass on to the content of the presentation. I always underline the importance of a strong introduction, capable of creating common ground and drawing the listeners' attention. The students were offered tips and examples on how to use various attention-getters – anecdote, startling facts and statistics, puzzling question, quotation from experts. I also stressed the importance of the conclusion and I offered my students various tips on how to end the presentation. As far as the organization of content was concerned, students could choose from among various patterns: chronological order, spatial order, topical order, classifying, explaining causes/effects, giving reasons, comparing/contrasting. In order to facilitate the intake, students were asked to complete various kinds of tasks. The final step consisted in devising a presentation outline and a final checklist against which the presentations were to be evaluated. The outline included: the speakers' names, the topic, the pattern of organization, the main points and subpoints of the introduction, body and conclusion. The checklist, on the other hand, included: each speaker's name, the topic and the aspects that should be taken into account: *delivery, content, organization, language, visual aids*.

### **Evaluating the Impact: Matches and Mismatches**

In order to evaluate the impact of oral presentation projects, the presentations were video recorded. Some fragments were then selected and played during the next class. A discussion followed, during which the students pointed out the strengths and weaknesses of the way in which their presentations were delivered. Table 1 below presents the strengths and weaknesses perceived by Romanian and Taiwanese students, respectively:

**Table 1.** Strengths and weaknesses in the delivery of oral presentations as perceived by Romanian and Taiwanese students

Strengths	Weaknesses
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>well-organized (introduction, body, conclusion)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>in some cases the presentations were either memorized (Taiwanese students) or read (Romanian students)</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>clarity of ideas</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>in some cases the volume was not loud enough (true for both Taiwanese and Romanian students)</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>good end-product (video clip/ or PP presentation)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>in some cases there was little or no eye contact with the audience (especially in the case of Taiwanese students)</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>presentations met time requirements</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>some speakers made grammar mistakes, mispronounced some words or were not fluent enough (true for both Taiwanese and Romanian students)</li> </ul>

### Conclusion

This paper has focused on the implications for teaching practice of the increasing number of English learners from *outer* or *expanding circle* countries and has advocated for a culture-sensitive methodology, capable of reconciling global demands of standardization and intelligibility with local socio-cultural factors. The author has described, analyzed and compared two different contexts of learning – Romania and Taiwan – with a view to share her experience of fostering the students' communication skills by means of oral presentations. The last part of the paper has dealt with the concrete procedure used by the author in implementing oral presentation projects in the Romanian and Taiwanese context of learning, respectively.

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### **Biodata**



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