Training across cultures: content, process, and dialogue

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This article discusses cross-cultural issues in the delivery of teacher training courses. Its main term of reference is the Hollidayan idea that the lasting success of training teachers from different cultural contexts depends largely on finding methodologies which are culturally appropriate.

Though the training course described was set within the context of a specific project with teachers from the Republic of Georgia, the culture-to-culture approach described in this article has relevance to other cross-cultural contexts.

The main focus of the article is a three-week training course which took place in the UK. I describe the decisions I made about content and process in the light of my awarenesses about, and knowledge of, the specific national and educational cultures which I first acquired on a visit to Georgia, and then refined as the course progressed.

The context

The project

The basic terms of reference of the project were to increase the level of foreign language knowledge within the Civil Service of the partner country, Georgia. This was to be done by setting up a self-funding ESP Centre in the English Faculty of Tbilisi State University.

As the English Language and training 'expert', my first objective would be to conduct a needs analysis of the facilities, equipment, materials, and also the training needs of the English Language teaching staff. On the needs analysis visit I accompanied a project manager from a UK university who had visited Georgia several times. It was my first visit.

The needs analysis

To a large extent the success of the project depended on our ability to forge good links with the local personnel, to understand what Holliday (1994: 113) calls their 'real world problems', and to have some insights into the 'surface' and 'deep action' of the institutional culture. Given the scope of this

paper, I shall not focus on this process, though ultimately it is central to the sustainability of the project, and to whether or not 'tissue rejection' takes place.

Since I was only in Tblisi for eight days my priorities were to quickly understand as much of the local context as possible, and to get to know the teachers who had already been chosen by our partner, the Dean. I would also observe a number of classes.

Class and teacher observations

The eight English teachers I met were those already teaching ESP within the Faculty, and who for this reason had been chosen to be included in the project. They were currently teaching English for Business, English for Law, and English for International Relations, as well as other academic subjects common to English faculties.

The teachers were academically well-qualified,with wide-ranging experience of teaching at the university. Their level of English was high, as one might expect, and showed evidence of extensive reading and interest in the language. Given that all of them had learnt English in almost complete isolation from English-speaking countries, they would obviously benefit from contact with 'real' English in real communicative contexts. Their English was accurate, but on the whole lacked naturalness.

I observed a number, though not all, of the teachers. What follows is a description of one of the classes I watched, written up from my notes; it brings out the main features of the teaching and learning patterns I saw in all observed lessons. These observation notes form the basis of my description of the differences in teaching and learning cultures, and for the training needs analysis.

Observation

I observed T. teaching a 45-minute Business English class in the English faculty. It was a class of 10 students, of WHOM 8 were female, and 2 male; all had books, and were very attentive and keen. They were third-year undergraduates studying English Language and Literature; Business English was an option for them. The book was an American Business English book from the early eighties.

Procedure:

1. The lesson started with a vocabulary check. The class had been told to learn words at home. T. checked pronunciation and meaning, the latter often, though not always, with translation. They were words such as 'joint venture', 'cartel', and 'licensing arrangement' .

2. They 'performed' a dialogue in pairs. The students had learnt it by heart, presumably at home. The teacher immediately corrected any mistakes of pronunciation by repeating the word until the student got it right. It was the same dialogue, so we heard it four times.

3. The teacher gave them ten more items of decontextualized vocabulary.

Translation, repetition.

4. The teacher set them a homework task, to learn a passage by heart.

Features:

• In 'real life' T. is lovely, very warm and friendly, smiling, easy to get on with. In the class she seemed to undergo a personality transformation. I felt she was 'playing teacher' somehow, and was quite stern. The students seemed to accept it as perfectly normal:

• errors immediately corrected, no self-correction, always teacher CORRECTION

• all ACTIVITIES done in plenary, SO THAT all the students had to listen to everything

• teacher always 'in control', so that although the class was small enough for group and pair work to work well, there was none.

• all focus on 'code', none on 'meaning' . No 'real communication'

• vocabulary often decontextualized, and lots of rote learning

• students were focused and responsive

It is clear from my notes that I found the lessons difficult and frustrating to watch. However, I did notice that students were unfailingly responsive and keen.

Culture to culture

My intrusion into the Georgian context, described briefly above, can be seen in terms of Culture A

meeting Culture B. In thinking about this cultural encounter it is useful to remind ourselves of one phenomenon that typically happens when a member of culture A enters culture B. A British person is used to fairly strong tea, made with boiling water, and served with milk. She goes to a foreign country and asks for tea. She gets weak tea, possibly made with water which hasn't yet boiled, and is served black. She tastes the tea, and doesn't say that it's different: she says that it's bad.

Or, in other words, as Robert Lado (1986: 59) points out: 'we can expect … trouble in the fact that members of one culture usually assume that their ways of doing things, of understanding the world around them, their forms and their meaning, are the correct ones.'

To make assumptions about appropriate methodology on the basis of a such a short visit is clearly dangerous. Holliday (1994: 17) makes the point that 'In order to arrive at appropriate methodologies, practitioners need to take time to investigate what happens in the classroom.' He emphasizes the need to look at wider social forces, and how they interact with the classroom. On this occasion, however, I didn't have much choice; I was forced to work within the timescale of the project.

My starting point was an awareness that I was coming from a completely different culture, in every sense. Like the 'Brit' drinking tea abroad, I was trying the foreign form and finding it definitely inferior. Though I was aware of the dangers, my instinctive reaction was to think 'there's definitely a better way'. The only way forward was a deeper understanding of the two cultures.

BANA and TESEP

Holliday (1994: 12–13) draws a distinction between two halves of the English teaching profession, BANA and TESEP. He defines BANA as 'that which is oriented towards the private sector in **B**ritain, **N**orth **A**merica and **A**ustralasia', and TESEP, from **te**rtiary, **se**condary, **p**rimary, as 'state education in the rest of the world. Whilst TESEP is state-oriented, BANA is 'instrumentally-oriented', that is to say that its main term of reference is adult groups specifically learning English. TESEP refers to institutions which are not commercial (i.e. state schools and universities), and which have students who are not learning English for such a clearly instrumental purpose.

Another aspect of the BANA/TESEP distinction that Holliday highlights is the difference in status. He says (1994: 12–13): 'Because of the hegemony of the received BANA English language teaching methodology, and because there are few examples of high-status methodologies grown from the TESEP sector, the latter sector automatically becomes second-class in that it is forced to make difficult adaptations of methodologies which do not really suit.'

One of the cultural levels on which the encounter between myself and the Georgian teachers can be seen is this BANA/TESEP level. My training, and most of my ELT education, has been firmly rooted in BANA. I have little experience of actually teaching in the state sector in any country, though I do have some experience of training state school teachers from a variety of countries, some of them in Eastern Europe. *Their* experience, on the other hand, has been entirely within state education. In addition, the whole idea of 'private education' is a relatively new concept in countries of the former Soviet Union.

My background in BANA, with Communicative Language Teaching as my main frame of reference, clearly gives me a certain cultural perspective on teaching and learning, and on the roles of teacher and learner. It predisposes me towards what Holliday (1994: 53–4) calls the 'learning group ideal', the 'notion of the optimum interactional parameters within which classroom language learning can take place'. From my cultural perspective, the 'learning group' is the best way to achieve what Holliday calls ' process-oriented, task-based, inductive, collaborative communicative … methodology.'

In terms of Coleman's (1987: 97–8) 'teaching spectacle or learning festival', I favour the learning festival. Holliday (1994: 36) describes Coleman's distinction in the following way: '…teaching spectacles in which the students are largely passive and behave like an audience watching the spectacle of the teacher's teacher-centred performance, and 'learning festivals', where students participate in the activity of learning as they would participate in a festival.'

There are other ways in which the encounter can be seen as a meeting of different 'cultures'.

The concept of national culture, though a broad and unwieldy one, serves as a backdrop to the whole encounter. Clearly knowledge and awareness of the differences between the cultures can be beneficial. National culture, however, is only part of the story. Holliday (1994: 111) makes the point that the problems **THAT** (?) occur in English language projects are not due to, but only exacerbated by, national cultural differences.

Professional–academic cultures

A more productive way of looking at this cross-cultural encounter is the difference in professional–academic cultures. Holliday suggests that we might see the BANA and TESEP halves of the profession as belonging to two different professional–academic cultures which are potentially in conflict.

Bernstein's (1971) 'collectionist'/'integrationist' paradigm is a useful way of discussing the differences

in these cultures. The collectionist culture is characterized by didactic, content-based pedagogy, rigid timetabling, and vertical work relations. The integrationist culture is characterized by skills-based, discovery-oriented, collaborative pedagogy, flexible timetabling, and horizontal work relations.

Within this paradigm, the group of university professors and lecturers I was to work with fell clearly within the 'collectionist' half of the division. All of my teaching experience has been within the 'integrationist' half. Interestingly, if I had been working with a group of UK university teachers there might well have been a similar culture clash!

Apart from the teacher group, there is also the classroom, and the other participants, namely the students. Breen (1986) discusses various metaphors for the classroom, but favours the *classroom as culture* metaphor, which addresses the interactive and social aspects of the classroom. This metaphor also implies opaqueness and complexity, a complexity which Breen (1986: 142) refers to as a coral reef, the surface hiding a multiplicity of life forms. Holliday also stresses the interconnectedness of the classroom culture with that of the local student culture, the host institution culture, the professional–academic culture, or cultures, and, finally, the national culture.

An important aspect of seeing the classroom as culture is that, as Holliday (1994: 31) puts it, 'more is going on between people than the transfer of knowledge and skills between the members of the classroom group'. It is difficult for the outsider to the classroom culture to decipher behaviours and patterns of interaction, and she has therefore to be wary of jumping to conclusions. When the outsider is not only an outsider to the classroom culture, but also to the other 'cultures' listed above, she has to be particularly careful.

Host culture vs. visiting culture

What, then, were the key differences between the two teaching and learning cultures involved in this encounter, as far as the 'surface action' of the classroom is concerned? These descriptions will serve both as an explanation of the reasons why I found what I observed so difficult, and as the starting point for looking at the design of the teacher training course.

Teacher-centred vs. learner-centred

From my 'integrationist' viewpoint, the students in the lessons I observed, however keen, seemed to be relatively uninvolved. I felt that this was not because they did not want to be, or because they were not able, but because there was strong central control.

The lessons, then, were, in my terms, 'teacher-centred', rather than 'learner-centred', even though the ESP classes I saw were small (8–12 students). My assumption was that teachers transferred methods they had acquired from teaching larger classes, i.e. lecture-style, high teacher talking time, low student talking time, no pair- or group-work. Lessons were much more 'teaching spectacle' than 'learning festival'.

Transmission vs. collaboration

The teachers I observed clearly felt that it was their role to transmit declarative knowledge, or information *about* the language, to their students. Evidence of procedural knowledge, or *practice* of the language in the lessons was very limited. The teacher's job, then, was to transmit content, and, as Widdowson (1993) points out, 'in transmission, input is equated with intake'. This idea of what he calls 'authoritative transmission' contrasts sharply with my BANA, integrationist background, which sees the teacher as the manager of learning.

As explained earlier, my own acute awareness of the lack of pair- or group-work in the classes I observed comes from the integrationist notion of the 'learning group ideal'.

These differences also bring into play some fundamental issues about the role of the teacher within the different cultures. The distinction that Widdowson (1993) makes between 'teacher as sage' and 'teacher as pedagogue' is a fundamental one, which would eventually have an important effect on the Georgian teachers' whole view of methodology.

Grammar translation vs. Communicative approach

In classes I observed that there was a lot of emphasis on grammar and lexis, but little emphasis on practice driven by communicative needs. Learning by rote was a key feature of the methodology, as was translation and back translation. In short, it was grammar-translation, often using the Russian style of text, analysis of text, comprehension, and structural manipulation. Students were corrected immediately for inaccuracies, and fluency was not given a high profile.

The teaching I saw was therefore focused on the code of the language, rather than on meaning or communication. From my perspective, there was no attempt at conveying what I might call 'real meaning'.

It also has to be stressed that Communicative Language Teaching, which has dominated ELT in the West over the past 15 years, relies on the immediate or near-immediate need to communicate using the target language. It also, of course, relies to a large extent on up-to-date materials, full of real,

contemporary language.

Content vs. process

The lessons seemed to me to be very content-focused. There was little evidence of what I would call 'pedagogy'. It will be clear from what I have said that the 'didactic, content-based pedagogy' of the collectionist paradigm here meets the 'skills-based, discovery-oriented, collaborative pedagogy' of the integrationist paradigm.

This brought me back to the *teacher as sage or pedagogue* dichotomy, and here I had two key questions to think about. Firstly, if the teacher's role in this context was primarily that of 'sage', how did the teachers feel about pedagogy, and pedagogues? Within my culture, 'teaching too is a learning process and has no specially privileged position', as Widdowson (1993: 261) puts it. Secondly, what would be the appropriate training methodology for teachers from such a content-focused culture? The answers to these questions would be central to the design and delivery of the training course.

The training course

Framework

My BANA background means that, as a teacher trainer, I am very concerned with process. Peter Maingay (1997) has written about the dangers of using a mainly process approach with teachers who have expectations of content-based training. What Maingay (1997: 121) calls 'mismatched assumptions' result in a kind of 'pragmatic failure'. Jenny Thomas (1983: 94) describes 'pragmatic failure' as 'any occasion on which H (the listener or reader) perceives the force of S's utterance as other than S (the speaker or writer) intended that s/he should perceive it'.

The dangers of 'pragmatic failure' in the training situation, in which there may be a number of mismatches in terms of expectations of content and methodology, are clear. When I was thinking in advance about the course, my dilemmna was not only how to avoid this pragmatic failure, but also how to have some eventual effect on the teachers' practice. This effect would be important if the new ESP centre was to offer a viable 'product' in Tblisi.

My decision was to work at least partly within the existing 'content' framework, to gradually open up the issue of process, and ultimately to create a dialogue between the two. My guiding metaphor was similar to the one Holliday uses, of a kind of trade. The endeavour relied on both sides gaining from the exchange of goods. The overall framework, though, was still a process approach; I had a sense of the course as an organic process which would adapt and evolve as I incorporated new awarenesses

about them.

Process meets content

There follows a list of observations I made about the teachers and their attitudes to the teaching and learning process during the needs analysis. After each observation, in italics, is the 'response': how I incorporated this knowledge and awareness into the design and delivery of the course. I shall also include my own comments on the success, or not, of activities mentioned, together with their feedback.

a.   The teachers operated very largely in the world of theory. They were used to starting with abstract principles.

I put theory 'up front' by immediately talking about the theories behind, for example, the transmission model and experiential learning. I used lecture as a mode of input much more than was my usual style. I gave the teachers handouts on, for example, the background to CLT.

The intention was to 'open up' the dialogue between us as fellow professionals, and also to make explicit my ideology and values. I learnt that it also helped if I started with principles and then moved to practice, though my norm is to work the other way.

b.   The teachers felt that their training needs were primarily related to language and culture.

I did a little language work every day, firstly with the teachers acting as students, followed by reflection on the process. They are all excellent linguists, and this work also helped to build their confidence in the relatively new world of pedagogy.

c.   As teachers, they were responsible for 'giving the lesson', not 'managing learning'.

I used group work and pair work with them much of the time, and once I had set it up, tried to model 'letting them get on with it'. I learnt a lot about how their students might react by working in this way. It was very hard to leave them to it, as they kept asking me to look, listen, or tell them something. They forced me to teach.

I focused their attention on process by using, for example, process reviews. This was very counter-cultural, and I found it quite hard to get them to really review process. I often got the impression that they found it unnecessary, though they were always polite.

d.   From the outset they said they were keen to learn new teaching ideas.

Whenever we talked about an idea for an activity , it was always followed by getting them to think about whether they could use it, and if so, how. My usual framework for doing this was a) easily transferable, b) transferable with adaptations, and c) not transferable.

e.   They had relatively little experience of teaching students who had immediate communicative needs. Linked to this was their focus on accuracy, not fluency.

I had asked them to do their own needs analysis of a prospective student before coming to England. They did this well, and we used it as a basis for work on the course. It seemed to focus them on the task in hand.

I tried to bring them back constantly to their 'new' students, who would have immediate communicative needs. The accuracy and correction 'issue', though, proved to be almost non-negotiable. They felt that they were not really teachers if they did not correct constantly. I tried to model not correcting constantly, but correcting effectively.

*I got them to give 'presentations' on an ESP topic, which they had to research and prepare with guidelines. I then gave feedback on accuracy of language **and** communication skills.*

f.   They were not used to reflecting on their own practice. They had never observed each other, and had only been observed rarely. I doubted, from their reaction to my observation, whether they had ever experienced supportive observation.

I gave them a notebook to keep a diary at the beginning of the course. They did it dutifully, not really knowing, I think, why they were doing it. I feel it wasn't very successful.

I did an activity where they had to reflect on their best lesson, and on one that didn't work very well.

I made observation a feature of the course. They all went into language schools and observed Business English classes. They took notes, and we discussed their observations. We also did two sets of video observation. They enjoyed the observation tremendously, and got a lot out of it.

g.   They were not used to eliciting feedback from students.

I started the course by getting information from them about their expectations. I tried to take account of these as much as possible.

I asked for daily, ongoing feedback, and used a variety of different oral and written methods for doing this, for example, 'my favourite activity', 'what was good, what could have been better'. We reviewed these ways of eliciting feedback regularly.

h.   Apart from 'language', they perceived their needs in terms of the equipment and materials we would supply them with.

We did quite a lot of 'adapting course materials' work. I was concerned that somehow the 'book' would take the place of teaching, as I had seen in classes in Tbilisi. I focused on showing them how to make book-based material 'come alive'. My idea was that they would have a set of ready-made lessons to take away with them.

i.   The teachers did not personalize very much, nor did they spend much time on establishing and maintaining rapport.

I personalized all activities as much as possible.

I worked with metaphor a lot, using Meighan as a starting point. I felt that this would help them to 'reframe' the way they saw students and learners.

It was clear from the comments they made after their observations that they noticed when teachers were establishing rapport. Though they at first thought that Georgian students would not react well to this, they modified their views as the course progressed.

j.   Most of them already had experience of teaching small groups of 8–12 students.

Since I was working with a group of eight, activities were, theoretically at least, immediately transferable in terms of class management. I did frequent 'awareness raising' exercises about this, for example, getting them to review the different ways I had used to manage the class during the day.

Dialogue : the end and the beginning

I found the process of making explicit the ideology and values which underpin my work an unusual and exhilarating one. I think they, too, found the look at another 'culture' exciting. It is hard to say more than that at this stage. My aim was to explore culturally sensitive and effective training modes, and to at least allow them to reflect on their current practice. What effect this will ultimately have on their practice is very much open to conjecture.

The dialogue, though, is certainly open; the exchange of goods has started. They are drinking tea with milk, and I am drinking Georgian black tea. Both sides have found the experience unusual, but we can now at least say that it's 'different' rather than 'wrong'.

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