Conference

Employability Forum

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1. Introduction

The English language is very much at the heart of the British Council's mission of cultural relations. But I think we need to be clear from the outset about what I mean here by “culture”. I don’t mean some diffuse sense of a higher order of being, or something that is all about opera and Constable and Shakespeare.

I agree completely with Stuart Hall, a professor of sociology who abandons such outmoded notions and sees culture rather as, I quote,

"lived experience, the consciousness of a whole society; that configuration of valued experience, expressed now in imaginative art of the highest order, now in the most popular and proverbial of forms, in gesture and language, in myth and ideology, in modes of communication and in forms of social relationship and organisation."

Language is obviously central to our view of culture.

I am going to talk this morning – under the heading Teaching English around the World – about how the context in which we carry out our work in cultural relations is changing, what this means for our work in English language teaching, and how new trends in teaching and learning are emerging.

2. The changing context of our work

In today’s world, a country’s standing and influence increasingly depend on an appreciation of its values and achievements and on demand for its intellectual property – its knowledge, skills and ideas. This is where the British Council seeks to achieve its purpose.

The British Council creates a space for dialogue. And, as events continue to show, dialogue is more important than ever. For anyone who saw culture as ‘soft’ – a welcome but ultimately optional aspect of life – then events show how wrong they were. Cultural relations are of paramount importance. Having access to a diversity of cultures also helps us to understand each other, not simply as different, but as bearers of a common humanity. We come to recognise not only the ways we are different but also the ways we are the same. And it is our common humanity that dignifies us all.

Operating in 109 countries and 216 towns and cities, the British Council brings together people and organisations to create understanding, mutual respect, and an interest in having a closer engagement with the UK and its people. Through the unique combination of strengths it brings to cultural relations, the British Council contributes in a distinctive but integral way to the United Kingdom's international
relations, supporting and complementing the UK’s diplomatic, commercial and development efforts.

Cultural relations are a long-term commitment. They depend on trust and reputation - which are not achieved overnight.

We must recognise how the world is changing. Globalising movements are creating patterns, coherences and power networks that bypass traditional boundaries. Whether it is e-commerce, common media, or economic federalism, these new movements are some of the most powerful determinants of contemporary international relations.

The United Kingdom is changing too. The UK is probably now one of the most diverse nations in the world. For example, in North Kensington, an area in London of 26,000 people – just a large urban village – more than ninety languages are spoken. Britain has changed and, while there are inevitably those who feel the threat of that difference, there is now wide recognition that cultural pluralism and a celebration of diversity are the way forward. There is no need for just one narrative for a nation, or indeed for a person...

I am at the same time an Englishman, part Welshman and a European who was born in the West Indies – and a lot of other things too, in different circumstances and environments. The lives of men and women are enriched by being able to choose the narratives or images that allow them to define themselves, to make sense of their relationship with their community, to gain an insight into lives very different from their own.

It is essential that those of us involved in educational and cultural dialogue have some understanding of these forces at work in our modern world. We now realise that the focus of our cultural diplomacy should increasingly be on mutuality – building bridges between cultures – rather than on the promotion of UK culture alone. As the UK changes and, like all nations, previously clear distinctions between the UK’s domestic and international agendas are increasingly blurred, we need to listen more to the UK we claim to represent.

3. What this means for our work in English language teaching

As I mentioned earlier, the English language is at the core of everything we do, and the promotion of English is a key duty set out in the Royal Charter, which brought us into being. We have made over the years a solid contribution to the development of English as a world language, working closely with students, teachers and governments around the world.

Some have even accused us of “linguistic imperialism”. While it is clearly true that language opens a powerful window onto another culture, cutting up the world in slightly different bits of meaning, we prefer to subscribe to our role as supporting the development of English as a tool for global interaction.

It might be useful to have a look at the context in which we are working today:

Clearly globalisation is creating more and more demand for English as an international language. Key individuals and groups need English to enable them to function more effectively in international arenas. The English language is seen less and less as belonging to certain nations (for example, the UK or USA) and more as a tool for international communication, owned by its users. UK and European
professionals are at the forefront of work to describe and thus raise the status of international English. Users seek global intelligibility while retaining local/regional identity. Connected to this, following the events of 11 September, there is an expressed need to facilitate wider access to English language services and products with much wider, younger audiences, particularly in the Islamic world, using existing systems wherever possible.

New media provide opportunities for more people to access resources for learning and for information and recruitment to education courses abroad. However, access is not equal and delivery strategies need to respond to wide variations in connectivity levels and consider ways of engaging with teachers and learners where connectivity is poor while capitalising on the opportunities good connectivity offers. Online services are proliferating, with resulting variability in quality and reliability. With increased security concerns in a number of countries, there is a need for the UK to interact with English language learner and teacher target audiences in ways that do not require traditional face-to-face contact. Online services provide an alternative mechanism for delivery of these services.

Cross-border and regional professional networks are being set up and sustained by teachers and planners, taking increasing advantage of opportunities offered by the internet and thereby enhancing opportunities for intercultural dialogue across and between regions.

Governments across the world are responding to the demands for English by increasing their investment in ELT in schools, including at primary level, and in teacher training. They continue to look to the UK for expertise and assistance in extending and improving ELT provision.

ELT in the UK is becoming more aware of, and responding to, the need to be more ‘joined-up’ in their approach to winning and keeping market share, and raising awareness in government of the importance of ELT to the UK. In the UK, English language teaching touches the lives of over 700,000 adult learners a year. And last year over 600,000 people came to the UK to be taught English as a foreign language. Another 100,000 adults who have settled permanently in the UK learnt English as a second language. Beyond these known learners there are three million second-language speakers who have settled in the UK, of whom an estimated 1-1½ million are unable to function in society because of a lack of English language skills. A further 546,000 primary and secondary school pupils in England and Wales are identified as having English as an additional language but there is no data on how many of these get access to language support.

At the same time the provision of English for speakers of other languages is changing very fast. The traditional distinctions we used to make between English as a foreign language (EFL) for people who come to the UK temporarily to study English, English as a second language (ESL) for people who have settled in the UK, and English as an additional language (EAL) for pupils of school age who have settled in the UK etc, are becoming increasingly fuzzy as the reasons why people want to learn English are converging.

So how is the British Council responding to some of these challenges and opportunities?

4. Elements of our response around the world
The backbone of our response is our global network of teaching centres and specialist English language staff. We currently run 110 teaching centres around the world and teach some 150,000 students at any one time – which represents more than a million class hours.

We are particularly interested at present in looking at ways that new media can be used to support language learning in different contexts (in2English in China or in exploring new models of teaching centres). We believe that good practice models developed in this area might be of interest in the UK, particularly where there is limited access to formal face-to-face ESOL [English for speakers of other languages] education (or for women who might be unwilling to attend a class).

We aim for our input into English language projects globally to have a sustainable effect on state education systems by sharing and passing on British expertise to ministries of education and other policy-makers. This has instigated positive change in the state provision of English language teaching in many countries (particularly those of Central and Eastern Europe), and regional and increasingly trans-regional co-operation is effectively disseminating this positive change in English language provision on a global level.

Let me give two examples of new approaches that we have recently developed.

The Peacekeeping English Project (PEP) is designed to establish effective systems of English language training and testing for civil and military forces in twenty-four countries of Central and Eastern Europe and Central Asia. The Project considers the needs of NATO aspirants and Partnerships for Peace countries in Europe. It highlights the benefits of democratic, collaborative and transparent approaches to training, which achieve wider impact in society beyond language teaching.

For the past two years we have supported an international award to celebrate the important contribution that the effective transfer of English language skills makes to learning and employment opportunities in many communities around the world. This award is part of an award scheme staged every year by the UK-based NGO, Worldaware, which aims to raise awareness of global development issues in the UK. The British Council Award is open to not-for-profit organisations that can show how their English language teaching activities have made tangible contributions to sustainable development. In the past two years we’ve recognised the achievements of winners from Romania and Thailand, and highly commended entries from South Africa, Pakistan and India.

5. … and in the United Kingdom…. 

Our work in the UK is fundamentally about partnership with – and support to – the highly professional UK resource.

We work in the UK to promote good practice through managing the English in Britain Accreditation Scheme, which has a membership of 370 UK private language schools and ELT/ESOL departments in further education and higher education. The aim of the Scheme is to protect the interests of international students in the UK by offering them a range of institutions that have reached agreed quality standards. The Scheme standards are agreed by consensus with the ELT industry, and cover all aspects of a student's stay, including academic and pastoral/welfare aspects…
We believe there are elements of good practice encapsulated within the Accreditation Scheme's standards, and its management, which we are happy to share with other standards agencies within the UK.

We work closely with UK examination boards to develop good practice in assessment of ELT/ESOL proficiency worldwide and in the UK, and the establishment of recognised qualifications for teaching English as a second or other language.

We also work with UK universities to support the work they do in partnership with TEFL [teaching of English as a foreign language] departments in other countries, particularly in the areas of teacher development and curriculum reform.

We are particularly interested, finally, in supporting the development in the UK of innovative and effective approaches to English language teaching. For that reason we introduced this year the 'Education UK ELT Innovation Awards', and will continue to develop the profile of these.

I’d now like to conclude by going back to my earlier thoughts about culture and its relation with English teaching and learning, and by beginning to draw out some potential implications for our work in this area.

6. Culture and English language teaching

The apparent banishment of culture from the classroom dates back to the 1970s. The Council of Europe, the body formed in the wake of World War 2 to assist in the prevention of ideological conflict, developed new standards in ELT based on English as an international language. Previous models that had taught culture as part of language were replaced by avoidance of ‘culture bound’ materials. ‘[The culture specific coursebook] will be of relevance only to students who understand the cultural background in which it is set’, wrote one ELT theorist at the time. ‘A strong portrayal of British life might well prove to be an impediment rather than a help to the learner.’

I’m not sure that this was ever the case, actually. Teachers have always been what we would now call intercultural mediators.

Alan Pulverness and other ELT thinkers have been instrumental in turning the tide. We increasingly acknowledge that you cannot teach a language without touching on the culture that has formed that language. At least, if you do, the learner is the poorer for it.

Teachers are now more aware that they are helping to prepare ‘international citizens’. How things are done in, for example, the UK, may no longer be the main point of reference to a learner from China wishing to work in, say, Syria. We increasingly recognise that people who use English as a second or foreign language outnumber native-speakers in a ratio of 3 :1.

The focus thus has shifted to one based on both ‘us’ and ‘them’ – a two-way exchange – and therefore to the role of the language teacher as an intercultural mediator.

By intercultural competence I mean the ability to raise students' awareness of their own culture and, in so doing, help them to interpret and understand other cultures. Intercultural competence is thus essentially about the effective communication between people of different cultures. The aims of intercultural learning are not to
transmit a body of knowledge but to develop skills and attitudes that will help learners communicate across cultures better.

Expanding cultural knowledge thus works in a number of directions at once. Those who teach must also be willing to take on board ideas from other cultures, and those who learn need to know that learning a language is not only about knowing something of the target-language culture.

That being the case, the British Council is ever more committed to playing a due role in this process.

Thank you.