

Case studies in teaching English in different cultural contexts

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Introduction

The aim of this presentation is to underline contrasting difficulties that students in various countries encounter when learning English because of diverging cultural and historical backgrounds. To begin with, let us remind our audience that because of the in depth complexity and length of each case study, one case study could stand on its own as a full article. As a result, we have highlighted the main features for each specific outline studied giving our audience a precise overview and up-to-date version for each case considered. In addition, we will underscore converging situations whereby English has become a second language, as is the case for Quebec, and a foreign language as is the case for India, Nigeria, and France.

Western civilization has gone through drastic linguistic clashes since its foundation: Greek and Latin in ancient times; and French in the 18th century. At present, English has supremacy because of the legacy of the British Empire. There will be other languages yet to come in the future, when English will be supplanted. Let us now go and develop our case study in teaching English as a second language in the Canadian Province of Quebec.

Case Study 1: Quebec, Canada

Cultural Background

This case study of teaching English as a second language in the Province of Quebec has very singular historical linguistic connotations. In order to understand why the Teaching of ESL has become a difficult task for teachers, one needs to have a better mental picture of Quebec's historical past.

Briefly speaking, from an historical stance, Quebec, having been discovered by the French, has been speaking French throughout its history. In 1763, through the Treaty of Paris, France gave up its North American possession to Great Britain. But in 1774, the British, through the Quebec Act, gave the French-speaking population certain rights, namely, their French language and French culture.

Because of the growing need of English, in a North American milieu, the Government of Quebec in the 60s and 70s increased its level of education in various fields of knowledge, English as well, by hiring a great number of teachers of English. As substitute teachers, first and foremost and without any specific qualification, they would eventually become teachers of ESL throughout the province. Other students went through the normal procedures by terminating their degrees in order to obtain their status as full-time teachers of ESL. This plan of recruiting newly appointed substitute teachers was of assistance to both teachers and students of ESL alike. As an educator, the teacher had to restrain students from speaking French in class; show that he had control of the class and not be overtaken by students' lack of self-improvement as well as motivation. As an ESL teacher, it was the policy of the substitute teacher to regulate all classes solely in English and to refrain from speaking in French unless the lesson was not grasped by the class. The substitute teacher also had the opportunity to explore grade levels, subject areas, and institutions.

Teaching of English in Quebec

Besides the linguistic issues which estranged both English and French, as previously mentioned, there was the religious issue as well. If one was born a Catholic he would be assigned to a Catholic institution, or vice versa, if he was Protestant, he would go to a Protestant school. One did not mingle with the other. It was also unworkable to modify the status quo regardless how intelligent one was or how high his grades were. It was absolutely not the norm of the day. Fortunately, it is not the case today.

Another major downside with teaching English in Quebec was merely political. Because of separatist-oriented ideas which existed throughout Quebec during the 60s and 70s, with the aim of becoming a self-governing province within Canada, where the prevailing language would be French instead of 'colonial English', students were not at all motivated to learn a language which they felt had preeminence in comparison to their own native language and culture. This lack of motivation is prevalent today and is a cause of major drawback in some part of the Province.

In general, student teacher relationships were apprehensive. ESL in Quebec is not only taught to French-Canadians, but to newly arrived immigrants, native Canadian First Nation, Inuit and to foreign students. The first group, the French-Canadians, in contrast to all the other groups is not interactively or instrumentally motivated. They are not yielding to the learning of English in a North American context nor are they being told of the importance of English in the world today as the 'Global Language' whether at work or in schools. This is due to the fact that a large proportion of Quebec's population is demanding sovereignty in language and education. (Kupsh, 1970). This article was written in the 70's as a consequence of the political arena described above.

Has the issue changed at the present time? In 2007, students were asked to fill out a questionnaire pertaining to their student-teaching experience. Winer (2007) showed that there existed a low student-teacher language proficiency, either learning English as a second language or vice versa, French as a second language for English students. There were unsettled and antagonistic attitudes towards English or ESL on the part of students and teachers alike in schools. English was not used in the ESL classrooms, and above all, there was no motivation nor class participation and interest at all in ESL or English culture. But again this is applicable only to a certain extent of the population. There is a minority that is eager to learn both languages and the ones that do master the two official languages of Canada are benefited by getting the most well-paid positions, whether in the private or in the public sector in and out of Quebec or Canada.

Case Study 2: Nigeria

Cultural background

Nigeria, situated in Western Africa, is diametrically opposite to the case just studied in Quebec. Generally speaking, universities, colleges, high-schools, and schools, as in most developing countries, lack basic requirements and facilities, specifically: adequate space for tutoring, insufficient up-to-date technology, such as computer access, derisory quantity of

qualified teachers or professors, at both lower and higher levels of education. But several countries such as Canada, under the sponsorship of CUSO; Britain with VSO, and the USA with the American Peace Corps, so as to help and promote education in manifold areas of learning-EFL in particular, send their teachers abroad. These governmental funded agencies recruit young university graduates as teachers, train them, and propel them as volunteers throughout the English-speaking world.

Nigeria is a country composed of various tribes divided between the Muslim north and the Christian south with a total population of 140 million people. Nigeria speaks English due to the fact that it became officially recognized as part of the British Empire on January 1, 1901. After W.W.11, and after successive waves of nationalism which had swept all over Africa, Nigeria was granted full independence in October of 1960.

There are approximately 400 spoken languages in Nigeria, of which Yoruba, Igbo and Hausa are recognized as national languages. English is the main language through which Nigerians communicate with one another, thus the need to improve their English ability. French is considered a second language due to the strong economic and cultural impact of the neighboring French-speaking countries of the Republic of Benin, to the west, Chad and Niger to the north, and Cameroon to the east. Regional and local languages are placed third on the scale of importance. English is used as a means of instruction at all levels of education and is studied as a subject as well.

But because of British colonization, as we have seen in Quebec and as we shall see in India later on, English was chosen so as to smooth the progress of the cultural and linguistic unity of the country. Though English is the official language, only a small percentage of the population communicates in English, as is the case generally throughout developing nations. In predominantly rural areas indigenous languages are widely used instead of English, though English is commonly used for education, business transactions and official purposes.

Pidgin English

One peculiar feature of Nigerian spoken English is its broken English sounds commonly known throughout West Africa as 'Pidgin English', which, by the way, is also considered a ramification of spoken English in the world today. In contrast to British, American or Australian English, Pidgin English needs perhaps more time to overcome its hardships and expand into a full grown modern language. But, as we shall see, the time has not yet come.

Pidgin English is the 'lingua franca' of the whole of Nigeria. There are branches of Pidgin English throughout West Africa but Nigerian Pidgin English is the native tongue to almost 5 million Nigerians and is a second language to 75 million people in West Africa including neighboring Ghana and Cameroon. West African Pidgin English arose during the period when the British dominated the Atlantic slave trade in the 1600s and 1700s. Presently, Pidgin English is not accepted in the educational sector. It lacks the prestige of the elite class and is recognized as being bad English mainly used by the non-literate and socio-economically deprived groups. According to Igboanuasi (year?), "Nigerian Pidgin has no official recognition and is without any policy statement.' It has been suggested that "...Pidgin should be left the way it has been, namely as an informal means of communication" (p. 1).

Teaching English in Nigeria

Teaching in Nigeria as a volunteer expatriate can be a challenging and uplifting experience. In the majority of rural areas, schools and high schools have barely the ‘substantial’ minimum of adequate material so as to live and teach according to normal world standards. As in most developing countries, the insufficient amount of income often compels teachers to find a second employment in non-academic activities. Added to these hardships, schools have no textbooks and material, no incentive for research or for writing, and outdated, if at all, lab equipment. One Nigerian researcher not named in the online article notes that “The teaching of English, which was the language of instruction beyond primary school, had reached such poor levels that university faculty complained they could not understand the written work of their students” (Portal education, year?, p.1). Let us not forget as well the rampant corruption and cheating among faculty and students at all levels.

In contrast to the inconsiderate methods used by local Nigerian teachers, often over emphasizing authority, Nigerian students appreciate foreign teachers for their moral approach and their uplifting new methods of teaching. As a result of the lack of books and material, Nigerian students have developed, throughout the years, very positive peculiar characteristics not seen to such an extent elsewhere in the Western hemisphere similar to the Oral Approach in language learning. A remarkable feature embedded deep in their minds is the ability or technique of assimilating quickly everything the teacher of English has just enunciated. Through the use of memorization students, in a chorus, repeat either a word or a sentence once or twice. The teacher then pinpoints students individually to see whether the word or the sentence has been learned. So as to assimilate words or sentences or to improve pronunciation, the teacher will then repeat it again out loud several times, until the message has been thoroughly absorbed. Once this is over with, the teacher may go on to the following word or sentence and repeat the whole process again.

In general, in teaching and learning languages, Ebo (1980) states that a penchant for Nigeria’s explicit approach is a given for reading in native languages and English. The fundamental language of education is primarily English with emphasis placed on native languages. And last but not least, in this global village so as to upgrade oneself from either his or her rural background and to achieve status in life, Nigerian students are well aware of the need to speak and write English as one of their own languages.

Case Studies 3: India

Cultural background

India is a colossal subcontinent with more than 1 billion people speaking many diverse languages. Unfortunately, India is a developing country and in some rural areas illiteracy is unbridled. English as a foreign language is spoken by approximately 100 million or more people.

Because of the amount of languages spoken, both regionally and nationally, and the density of its multicultural historical background, English is used as a vehicle to communicate throughout the country. Individual mother tongues number several hundred; a recent assessment has numbered it to be 415. Historically, as well as politically, two contact languages have played

a crucial role in the making of India: Persian and English. (Bhatic & Ritchie, 2006). With the introduction of the East India Company, English became the lingua franca since the first factory was established at Surat in the 16th century.

English today is the language of business, administration, commerce, tourism, law, and for military personnel. Indian authors who articulate and write in English and who have risen to worldwide fame include Tagore, Rushdie, and Seth to name a few.

Teaching English in India

All public schools throughout India have basically three languages in which they have been given the right to teach, namely: English, Hindi-the national language, and a regional language. In private institutions, English has become the first language while the regional language has become the second or third language depending on the location. In the state of Pondicherry, for example, an ex-French colony, French is the first language.

People in the north tend to communicate in English, in contrast to the south where a number of local languages are used, such as Tamil or Telugu. English is used mainly to converse with foreigners. Because the main emphasis in schools all over India is based on reading and writing with listening and speaking being left aside, English has become widely used largely in academic circles, thus the term ‘library language.’

In schools, at a lower level, students are regrettably asked to memorize whole texts and to repeat them for exams. There is also no creativity for debate nor is there any class participation. During exams they are again asked to repeat, even word by word, the whole content as the teacher had previously instructed them on that topic. Idiomatic expressions, pronunciation, and intonation are not considered of great significance.

English tests at a higher level usually consist of two papers: one on language, the other on a literary subject. The exams test a student’s comprehension, vocabulary, grammar, and writing. Students may also be asked to answer multiple-choice questions, sentence completion, and fill-the-blanks. The main central point is grammar and vocabulary items, in order to see whether a student has fully comprehended the content, as well as the identification of the main points and its supporting details. As in Taiwan, classes hold from 40 to 50 or more students.

In regard to newly updated technological material used throughout the industrialized world as opposed to developing countries which lack these facilities, on this theme, associated with India, Ramathan, (2008) says that “...teachers in schools do not have ready access to audio or video equipment, limiting the instructional methods they can use in class. Therefore, teachers rarely use audiotapes that might compensate for their own inadequacies...Nor do teachers ‘audio- or video-tape students’ performance” (p. 1). Also, activities depicting real-life situations or conversation useful in daily life is not given substantial credit, thus restricting students’ communication skills.

Before summing up the previous case study, let us mention another theme of great concern in India: India’s rapid technological expansion. While the technological sector, as well as other competitive sectors of Indian life, is going through swift economical change, to name a few, fashion, tourism, entertainment, and commerce... university professors, on the other hand, a well respected position, has seen a speedy decline in recent years, thus the shortage of qualified

professors. According to Shailaja (2008) “The faculty shortage has increased professors’ teaching loads making it difficult for them to keep up with their research” (p. 1).

In conclusion, India needs to improve its methods of teaching English at all levels, public or private; to pressure not on testing students but rather on learning; and lastly, teachers also need an in-training tune-up to restructure their teaching skills by updating their old teaching concept to the standard of industrialized countries, if India wants to compete in the world arena.

Case Study 4: France

Cultural background

Briefly speaking, in ancient times, the English language having had numerous conquerors in its territory such as the Angles, the Saxons, the Jutes, the Danes, and the Romans shaping what English is today, France has had several invaders in the past as well, explicitly, the Celts, the Gauls, the Franks, the Normans, and the Romans. As opposed to the notion that France is a monolingual country-French being the native tongue to almost 60 million people in its territory and not counting its overseas territories, it is a multicultural country as well. A variety of regional languages, to name a few, Alsatian; Basque; Breton; Catalan; Corsican; Flemish; Occitan are being spoken and studied in schools, high schools, and universities so as to maintain its past cultural ties, specifically Alsatian or more precisely a dialect of German, in its eastern borders with Germany; Occitan-an offshoot of Latin, throughout its southern eastern and western regions bordering Italy and Spain; and Breton-a Celtic language in the northwest. In addition to the aforementioned local languages, France being delimited by ethnically and linguistically diverse cultural backgrounds, such as German in the east, Italian in the south, Spanish in the southwest and English in the north, as of consequence the inhabitants of these regions speak or have a general idea of that particular neighboring language.

In the recent past, up until the 1960s, French was considered a diplomatic language at the UN. Nowadays, because of the EU, the most widely spoken language throughout all of Europe remains English with 51%; German 32%; French 26%; Italian 16%; Spanish 15%; and Russian 7%. In general, 38% of Europeans admit that they are able to hold a decent conversation in English. All through Europe English is predominant and has become a second foreign language.

Teaching of English in France

In the past, teachers of English as a Second Language in France needed simply to pass their exams in order to obtain their teachers’ certificate without any in-the-field programs. Teachers, in general, had no idea of English or American culture nor had they a sound knowledge of English pronunciation. Let us briefly state, in passing by, that the ‘th’ sound in English has remained throughout the years a major complex issue both for students and teachers alike, as well as the rest of the population in general.

Learning EFL since then has changed significantly. For a number of years, depending on the university concerned, there has been a joint venture program to train students studying to become English teachers between various French universities and Anglo-American universities. As an example, the University of Montpellier receives each year and for one semester a visiting professor from the University of Texas and the University of Iowa. Students, on their part, having successfully obtained a B.A. in English, with the sole purpose of teaching EFL, are

required to teach French abroad, as lecturers, in any English-speaking country if they wish to pursue their studies for a Master's degree program or higher. This allows students to get acquainted with the Anglo-American language and civilization abroad, on the one hand, and to develop their teaching skills as teachers of FFL, on the other.

Knowledge of EFL has become a serious concern both in France. One needs to look up at the French Embassy's web site in the USA to find out how France is to a great extent recruiting young American graduates to teach English in France in both schools and high schools and at higher institutions. Generally speaking, depending upon where one is positioned geographically in France, students in grammar schools are taught English-being the most popular, from 1 to 2 ½ hours weekly. In high schools, students who have chosen EFL, from a number of other languages, English becomes a compulsory subject and is being taught from 3 to 4 hours on a weekly basis. A third optional language may also be considered if the students so wishes again depending on locality.

The French government until recently has encouraged students of science and all other departments to strengthen their English by offering courses at specialized institutions, thus promoting research and propelling France to a worldwide audience. In this area under discussion, Regent, (1982) says "At the school of Science, foreign languages are compulsory in the first two years; at the school of Pharmacy, short courses in English have been introduced for students in their fourth and fifth year. In addition, a course for all pharmacy students has been inaugurated in oral English expression on pharmaceutical subjects," (p. 1).

At the University of Montpellier, as an example, Pharmacy students were given medical and pharmaceutical articles, extracted from Time and Newsweek Magazine, to be read and commented on orally with classmates and teacher alike. A discussion forum was henceforth created so as to motivate students to communicate in English. In other instances, at the Institute of Technology, students had up-to-date printed material concerning new technological inventions or computer-related subjects to be read and discussed in class in order to increase word-study and newly acquired vocabulary. This particular method of teaching allowed students in both sectors to be in close touch with current modern scientific trends in the Anglo-American world.

According to the French Ministry of Education's website, the French Educational system enjoys a widespread use of foreign languages taught both in schools, high schools, and in universities. But as of a few years ago, to the detriment of all the other foreign languages taught English prevails as the dominant foreign language. According to the census, German is studied by 16 %; Arab 0.06%; Spanish 2.23%; Italian 1.32%; Portuguese 0.25%; Russian 0.03%; other language 0.22%; regional languages 0.92%; and English 78.57%. Due to the excessive significance of its popularity as well as its global use, the Ministry also had in mind to render English a compulsory language at school, as is the case with the following European countries: Denmark, Greece, the Netherlands, Sweden, Liechtenstein, Norway, Cyprus, and Letonia.

Conclusion

If we are to analyze case one-Quebec and weigh it against Taiwan, we could underline that though Taiwan is enclosed by Asian countries, hence making contact with English-speaking countries an intricate undertaking to pursue, we find that, generally, through observation because

of its past historical and political ties with Western culture, Taiwanese students are to a great extent much more motivated to learn English than students in Quebec. Taiwan was never colonized by Britain-as in the case of Quebec, thus the resilience to study a foreign tongue. But, on the other hand, due to the fact that Quebec students are environmentally bordered by English-speaking provinces and states, Ontario and Upper State New York, the English or Anglo-American culture is at their doorstep. The case is diametrically opposite to Taiwan. Taiwanese students, as a whole, are well aware of the socioeconomic factors that are at stake with learning English.

In contrast to Taiwanese students who have no access to English-speaking countries, French-speaking Quebecers have an easy way in to English being bordered by Ontario and the USA. Today, if we compare and take statistics into consideration, French-speaking Montrealers are almost bilingual, in contrast to either Asians or southern Europeans who must struggle to learn English on a daily basis, thus the difference of English as a second language and English as a foreign language. Let us now move on to Africa and expand on our second case study, that of Nigeria.

If we study the case of France with Quebec, we find similar notions of chauvinism for both countries studied. Both feel threatened by the widespread use of English and English words being incorporated into their own language. Despite the fact that both cases are dissimilar from an historical perspective, Britain never conquered and controlled France, as is the case for Quebec, and as a result French students are perhaps more enthusiastic to learn EFL. In contrast to the populous and worldwide exercise of English being a 'lingua facem facit' or a people's language, the French Academy has a rigorous set of laws so as to shield and preserve its own native tongue from Anglo-Americanisms.

One country that is analogous to Taiwan is the case of France where English is taught in all sectors of life and at all levels of education be it in kindergarten, schools, high schools, or at higher institutions. Even in universities, whether in the arts or sciences or a specialized field of study, such as Engineering or Pharmacy faculty, English is comprehensively assimilated as a required subject so as to promote research studies. Students in both cases are well aware of the impact of English in their lives if they wish to further their careers. This shows how both governments of France and Taiwan are concerned with the teaching of EFL in their respective countries.

The case with India or Nigeria is very disparate for we do not find any patterns of proximity. Taiwan being a highly industrialized country has sound equipped labs and highly advanced technology so as to enhance the study of English. English is not a second language as is the case for India nor is it a first language living alongside an indigenous language as in Nigeria. It might be easier for Indian students to learn English because first and foremost of its historical ties with Britain and simply because of their close immediacy to their native Indo-European background. One major drawback, if we want to compare Taiwanese students to Quebec, French and Indian students have a linguistic affinity: English, French and north Indian languages are of Indo-European stock, in contrast to Chinese where there is utterly no linkage whatsoever with European languages, thus making English for Taiwanese students a harder mission to achieve.

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