

**CULTURALLY AUTHENTIC TASKS: PERCEPTIONS AMONG INDIAN
TEACHERS TEACHING ENGLISH IN TAMIL SCHOOLS**

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A dissertation submitted in fulfillment of the partial requirement for the award of the
degree of Master of Education (TESL)

Faculty of Education
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NOVEMBER 2007

DEDICATIONS

I wish to dedicate this work to:
my parents, S.A. Kannan and S.Athy,
my beloved wife, Geeta,
and
my two children, R.Gayathiri and R. Arcana

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

In all my humbleness and respect, I wish to dedicate this piece of work including the many endeavours undertaken, to my loving parents S.A. Kannan and S. Athy. I also pray for the blessings of my forefathers.

My pursuit of Masters (M. ED. TESL) has been possible due to the moral support of my beloved brother-in-law S. Selvarajoo and my sister S. Ananthy who has constantly assisted me in continuing my further studies at UTM.

It would be incomplete if I did not mention Assoc. Prof. Dr. Mohamad Hassan Zakaria my project supervisor, who at all times, guided and counseled me through the completion of project. Many thanks to Assoc. Prof. Dr. Abidah, Assoc. Prof. Khairi Izwan Abdullah, and also Prof Dr. Zaiton. I also thank my colleagues who were with me during my M. Ed. TESL studies at UTM, Skudai. Special thanks to my wife and children for their support in my studies.

ABSTRACT

Culture and language have been part and parcel of human life since ages. Everyday culture and language play an important role in shaping thoughts and ideas in our everyday lives. In fact language is culture. For the same argument, language learning and culture are inseparable as culture facilitates both the learning and teaching of language. This study has been undertaken to gather perceptions among the Indian teachers who teach English in Tamil schools towards culturally authentic tasks. In addition, the research seeks to find out the considerations for effective culturally authentic tasks as perceived by the teachers. The findings suggest that teachers perceived culture as a critical tool in language teaching especially in designing culturally based materials. Besides, the teachers considered cultural materials for language learning and teaching as very effective because such materials assist both the teacher and learners in the classroom. The insights from this research will hopefully enlighten the curriculum planners and syllabus and material designers on the importance of culturally based concepts in the English language syllabus.

ABSTRAK

Budaya dan Bahasa adalah sebahagian daripada kehidupan manusia sejak berzaman lagi. Setiap hari budaya dan bahasa memainkan peranan dalam membentuk dan membina minda dan fikiran kita. Tujuan kajian ini dilaksanakan ialah untuk mengumpul persepsi di kalangan guru-guru kaum India yang mengajar Bahasa Inggeris di Sekolah Jenis Kebangsaan Tamil terhadap aktiviti yang berunsurkan budaya. Kajian ini juga mengambil kira pertimbangan yang disarankan oleh guru-guru untuk mewujudkan bahan yang berunsur budaya. Dapatan kajian menunjukkan guru berpendapat bahawa unsur budaya ialah satu alat yang kritikal dalam pengajaran bahasa Inggeris terutama sekali dalam pembinaan bahan mengajar. Selain dari itu, guru-guru berpendapat bahawa bahan-bahan berunsur budaya dalam pembelajaran dan pengajaran adalah amat efektif dalam membantu murid dan guru dalam bilik darjah. Hasil kajian ini adalah diharapkan dapat menyedarkan perancang kurikulum dan pereka silibus dan bahan mengenai kepentingan konsep yang berasaskan unsur budaya dalam silibus bahasa Inggeris.

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background of study

As a multicultural country, Malaysia gives freedom to each ethnic group to practice its own ethnic culture. Ethnic identity in language teaching is something that is not new. In the Malaysian context, the question is: to what extent is the learner's ethnic culture being integrated into the teaching of English? In Malaysia, with its richness in cultural diversity, English language teaching in the classroom ought to be fun, varied and enjoyable. With unity in diversity being emphasized by the government, teachers need to capitalize on the richness of the learners' ethnicity in the English language classroom to make language teaching and learning more interesting, challenging, and localized. Teachers need to inject ethnicity in the content of the English language syllabus to enable students of the different races in Malaysia to be more motivated to learn English. The context of the content in their English language lessons needs to be localized to encourage and inspire the students to have a more positive outlook towards the language.

When topics are closely related to everyday life, pupils will feel that activities and the tasks being done in class will be more meaningful, and useful in the socio-cultural context. There is no denying that classroom tasks which have a personal linking to pupils will inspire and encourage them. The first culture that is the culture of the learner, which is the Indian culture, in that case will help Indian learners to acquire the English language

when taught through English. For example if we take the topics of food or religious festivals, the pupils who already have a rich background knowledge of such topics will obviously grasp concepts and ideas of lessons taught in the class rather than teach unfamiliar topics. Let's take the topic of festivals, for example, culture and traditions mention of many religious festivals. Thaipusam is one popular and obligatory religious festival. Knowing the rich background knowledge of the pupils, the teacher can design tasks to really get all the Indian pupils involved fully during the lessons. The English teacher can obviously capitalize on the situation and learning can take place and be fun as it relates to the pupils' own culture. When pupils recognize and have knowledge of topics, English language learning can no longer be boring. When learning becomes fun, the English language teacher's job of teaching English is already half completed.

As a multilingual society, Malaysia encourages its populations to maintain its mother tongue. An ethnic group will obviously want to maintain their originality where race, religion and culture are concerned. At the same time it is also beneficial for these ethnic groups to acquire languages widely spoken around them.

This study focuses on the ethnicity of the Indian teachers who teach English language at selected Tamil school (National Type Schools). It gathered their perceptions on English language tasks which were based on their ethnicity. Tamil speaking English language learners come to the class with a rich socio cultural background which is obviously useful. Their previous knowledge about culture, traditions and religions practices will be helpful in understanding concepts taught during English lessons. These

Indian English teachers who teach English to Indian students, will capitalize on the richness and variety of the Indian cultural elements to make teaching more interesting and meaningful.

The Malaysian schools basically, primary and secondary schools have their separate curriculums. The primary school is from standard or Year 1 to Year 6 and the secondary school is from Peralihan or Form 1 to Form 5 and then to Lower Six and Upper Six. The primary school is categorized as the Sekolah Rendah Kebangsaan which uses Bahasa Melayu as the medium of instruction. We also have the Tamil and Chinese vernacular schools, namely Sekolah Rendah Jenis Kebangsaan Tamil and Sekolah Rendah Jenis Kebangsaan Chinese respectively. All three categories of primary schools have different curriculum designs and syllabuses, outlined by the Ministry of Education. In these two vernacular schools the medium of instruction are Tamil and Chinese except for Bahasa Melayu and the English language. The unit responsible for the syllabus design and materials is the Curriculum Development Centre of Malaysia.

The Tamil Schools scenario in Malaysia is that of ethnic minority in terms of their culture and population. With the KBSR syllabus, all the other subjects except for Bahasa Melayu and English Language, are taught in Tamil. The English Language is only given seven periods per week so the number of teaching hours is only limited to the classroom. This is to say that, at least during the contact hours of teaching the language culturally authentic tasks or materials can be fully utilized further compared to the previous curriculum design of the KBSR system. Lack of experience and knowledgeable teachers in

this field contribute to the failure of giving comprehensible input to the students. So when these students reach the secondary school they are almost totally not being able to perform in the English Language compared to their other peers.

Tamil school teachers are selected for Teacher Training Colleges on the basis that they have to have at least a credit in the Tamil subject either for SPM level. (Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia or at STPM (Sijil Tinggi Pelajaran Malaysia). Most of the Teacher Training Colleges have at least one or two classes of teacher trainees either for the Tamil Option or the Chinese Option for these two vernacular schools. This government policy is to ensure that the Tamil and Chinese vernacular schools have enough teachers. As they are teacher trainees, they undergo teacher training as their other counterpart that is the teachers who will be teaching in the Sekolah Kebangsaan.

Though training is the same for all teachers, the disturbing idea is that some Tamil teacher trainees lack the proficiency in the English language as some of these teachers are from Tamil schools themselves. In the Tamil schools “as long as there is a classroom and children, the teacher and the headmaster [have to] work intently can produce better educated children”, as quoted by Dr. Tambirajah on *Indian-Malaysian online*.

But reality bites into the ideals. Few teachers are able to spare the kind of effort and time it takes to beat the odds. So, teaching especially in the Tamil school would be definitely a challenge to the Indian teacher teaching English language to the Tamil students

in the Tamil school. So, in this case culture obviously will play on the teaching learning process.

This study is based on various research and writings which stress on the important role of the learners' first culture. Among them are Tomlinson and Masuhara (2004) on local criteria for materials evaluation; Alptekin (2002) on intercultural competence; McKay (2000) and Kramsch and Sullivan (1996) on cultural materials for English as an international language; Cortazzi and Jin (1999) on culture in English language materials; Stern, (1992) on cultural syllabus; Banks (1997) on effective approach to multicultural curriculum; Cortazzi and Jin (1999); Tomalin and Stempleski (1993). For instance, Tomalin and Stempleski (1993) outline three qualities language activities should develop: 1) awareness of one's own culturally-induced behaviour, 2) awareness of the culturally-induced behaviour of others, and 3) ability to explain one's own cultural standpoints. This study, however, emphasizes on the cultural aspects of the learners' own ethnicity by examining ways to exploit Indian ethnic cultural elements to be integrated into the English language teaching in the classroom as culturally authentic tasks. These ideas will be discussed further in the literature review of this study.

This study was also triggered by personal experience listening to and watching some Indian teachers teaching Indian learners of the English language. They were proud of and valued their ethnic culture. I was happy see them use culturally authentic tasks effectively in the classroom.

However, this study, as in any other study on ethnicity, had been undertaken cautiously knowing that there are sub-groups within the selected ethnicity rendering the analysis subjective and relative. Gunaratnam (2003) asserts that ‘race’ and ethnicity are not ‘objective’, stable, homogenous categories, but are produced and animated by changing, complicated and uneven interactions between social processes and individual experience.”

1.1 Statement of problems

There have not been that many studies on the Indian ethnicity in education or English language learning. Sporadic reports on problems with Tamil schools and issues on Tamil language have been presented to the public but have not been based on extensive empirical research. Personal communication with Prof Dato’ T. Marimuthu (14 July 2006) however confirms common belief that “ethnicity is weakened due to a move towards a common culture in the Malaysian society ...and that students will learn English easier and efficiently if their own culture which they are familiar with is used in teaching. This clearly confirms that pupils in Tamil school will be able to learn English if the culture they are familiar with, is taught for the improvement of English language learning.

Existing materials or tasks may not offer learners the chance to reflect on their culture and thus provide a medium for language exploration as a tool for the learner’s social life. Maintaining values and beliefs in the teaching materials must be present and closely connected to social life in order for learning to be meaningful. The textbook materials may include materials to represent all cultures but they are insufficient, especially,

in a homogeneously Indian group of students. As for Tamil speaking English language learners, the current materials in school as are not effectively and sufficiently incorporated in the materials used in school

Thus expressing oneself in the English language has become difficult for Tamil school students and sometimes cause misunderstanding with others. Some pupils may have good cognitive skills, answer questions well and score good marks in their examinations but fail to have good communication skills in English language. Culturally authentic tasks (CATs) generate meaningful communication as they are familiar to the learners.

Due to the demanding nature and lifestyle of the modern day, western influence and globalization, family values and perceptions among the Indians suggest that some have lost their sense of ethnic identity. It seems that Tamil is no longer a prestige language among some Tamil speaking English language learners compared to English or Malay. This reflects the perception of these Indians who feel that their language and ethnic culture lack commercial value in the job market.

All over the country we hear of teachers commenting on the lack of interest amongst students at all levels of education. We hear of teachers talking about students not being motivated to learn the English language. Teachers also have to use their own innovativeness and creativeness to come up with materials for the teaching and learning process. In schools, the pupils are taught to be examination conscious and taught on techniques on how to answer examination questions, rather than developing communicative

competence which is actually the basis for the school curriculum of KBSR and KBSM. When students find difficulty in relating learning to the real world and their own culture, the result will be that the students become disinterested in understanding the content of the lesson. This causes the students to develop a passive attitude towards learning the English language. When this happens in vernacular schools then not only the pupils but also the teacher are not motivated to teach.

Culturally authentic tasks can be quite difficult to be designed and integrated into teaching due to their authenticity, relevance, and suitability. If incorporated into the syllabus well, then we can have a brighter future for the English language. Since many cultural practices are relative and subjective, the tasks have to be taken into consideration the sensitivity of different learners even within the same ethnic group. Culturally authentic tasks require careful designing and contribution from knowledgeable and experienced teachers who understand both cultural knowledge and pedagogy.

1.2 Significance of the study

This study will offer useful approach to materials design by linking the learners' own culture to language learning, for example, the nature of tasks in terms of their authenticity, relevance, and suitability. Materials designers will have to engage the learners and exploit their background knowledge during the materials design process in order to produce effective tasks

Furthermore, the study will also contribute to ELT methodology. Since culturally authentic tasks capitalize on the learners' cultural backgrounds, the tasks will lead to learner-centred teaching. In addition this study will empower the teachers.

This study can offer insights into curriculum planning and development for schools to address national goals which are useful for the Ministry of Education. It also serves as guidelines for various curriculum models, such as multicultural curriculum or teaching English across the curriculum. Both cultural specifics and universals of the Indian ethnicity offer useful information for the multicultural curriculum.

In addition, This study will contribute to a better understanding of the ethnic culture of the Tamil speaking English language learners, promoting awareness of their own ethnic culture and identity and positive values and ideals.

Lastly, this study also describes Malaysian pluralistic society and its aspiration of "Unity in Diversity" by acknowledging that Indian ethnicity defines Malaysian pluralistic society and it serves as an important part of the nation. Other ethnic groups can also learn from this study and it will, consequently, serve as the basis for designing, for instance, multicultural syllabus that promotes national unity.

1.3 Research Objectives

In view of the researchers opinion that culturally authentic tasks should be used in the English language classroom and that the cultural content should be included in the curriculum, the objectives of this study are:-

- (i) to find out the perceptions of culturally authentic tasks as perceived by the Indian teachers teaching English language.
- (ii) to determine considerations for effective culturally authentic tasks.

1.4 Research Questions

This research seeks to find answers to these questions.

1. What are the perceptions of Indian teachers teaching English in Tamil school towards culturally authentic tasks?
2. What are the considerations for effective culturally authentic tasks?

1.5 Definitions of Terminology

1. *Ethnicity / Indian ethnic culture:*

The ethnicity of the teachers who are Malaysian Indians practicing Indian culture and traditions, speaking Tamil and teaching English in Tamil schools (National Type Primary Schools).

2. *Culturally authentic tasks:*

Structured short activities or instruction based on a particular culture and tradition, the culture of the learners of English, which are to be used in English lessons. The tasks have to consider the learners' ethnic cultural aspects: cultural products (dressing, food), practices (festivals), and perspectives (value, belief system).

3. *Considerations for developing the tasks or criteria for good materials:*

Other than general considerations such as authenticity, relevance and suitability, two specific dimensions will be focused on: a) sociocultural considerations are those based on the Indian ethnic culture of the community, common beliefs as well as activities of their daily lives, and b) pedagogical considerations take into account the actual teaching or classroom practices.

1.6 Theoretical Framework

At present, the syllabus does attempt to include multicultural content (text and tasks) but only at a superficial level: the content is presented as mere information on culture but is not normally designed to engage the learners in meaningful language activities. In a typical classroom, the teacher's cultural background may not be the same as the learners' own culture. This can create problems during the interaction among the three elements: the

text, the learner, and the teacher. The acquisition and development of skills should relate to first culture text or tasks, with teachers of source culture knowledge for learners of first culture where learning can take place. The interaction among learner, teacher, and text can be represented as:

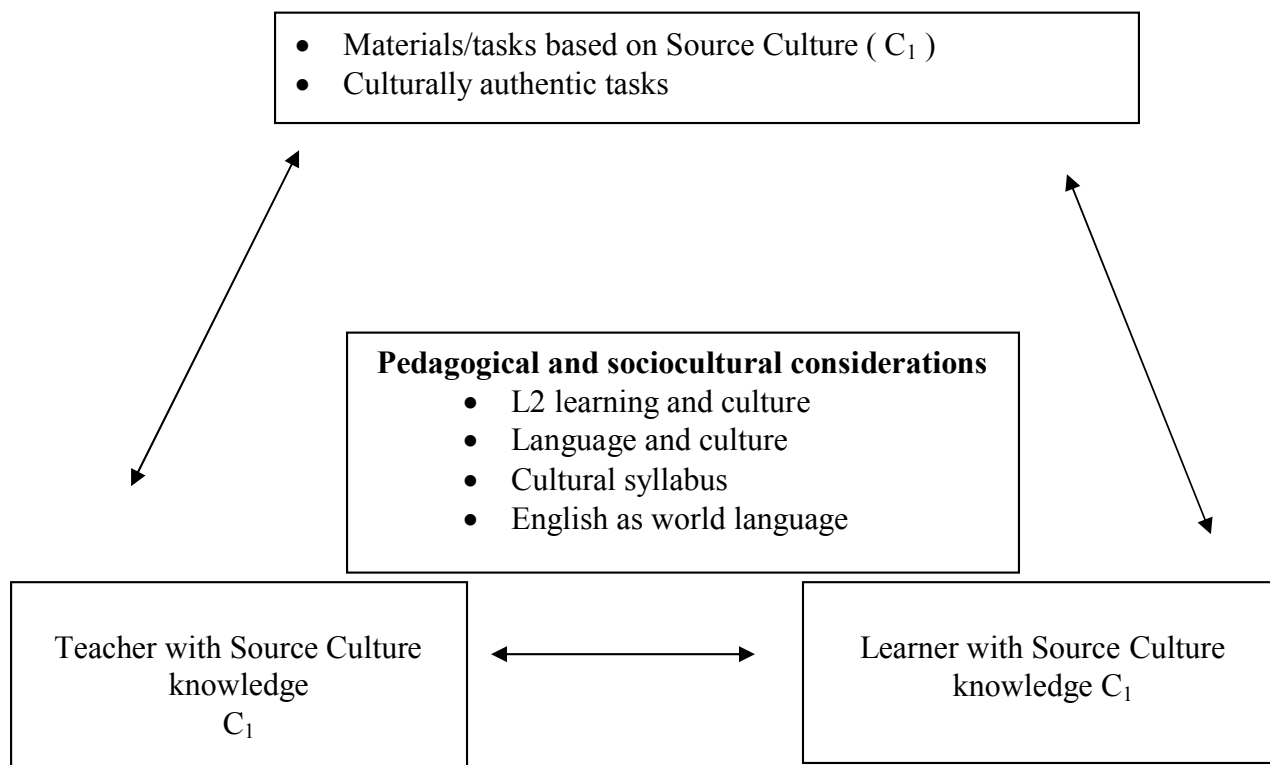


Figure 1: *The First Culture: Learner, Teacher and Task*

Within this framework teacher, students and materials share the same Source Culture (C₁) which is the culture of the learners. Such shared cultural knowledge and interaction are argued as benefiting the acquisition of the target language. The framework also assumes that tasks selected for the teaching and learning of English as a second language will have to take into consideration some pedagogical and sociocultural aspects:

that language and language learning cannot be separated from culture and that the learners' source culture plays an important role in learning a second language.

1.7 Limitations

In the view of the researcher, one of the limitations of the study is that only Indian teachers in Tamil schools in Kota Tinggi were observed. Even though it can be assumed that all Indians have similar perceptions on the tasks, there might be differences among Indians from different school, localities or even possible other Indian subcultures. Also as in any study on perception, there might be biasness in their responses due to personal reasons or ambiguity in the researchers' questions.