

Awareness of Students' Cultural Background for Today's Senior Teachers. An Editorial

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One of the pillars of teaching English is contextualisation. Teachers find it instrumental to teach and practice functional language and relevant linguistic reactions that fit the cultural context where they are likely to be used, but they also need to stay relevant to the realities of the student body who is at the receiving end. What are the challenges and caveats awaiting the mature teacher of English faced with students with such distinct cultural background as today's?

While staying topical rather than buried in an obsolete past is a no-brainer, there may be more ways for the EFL teacher to be irrelevant. To begin with, the teacher's baggage of assumptions may come from their own economic realities. This became evident to me a decade ago, when interviewing a few educated speakers in a developing country who was adamant that eating fresh vegetables was wrong, quite the opposite of the speech I had expected about the benefits of this source of vitamins, since, as my interlocutor said, it was much more important to boil all vegetables thoroughly in their disease-ridden context.

However, rather than an easily predictable culture gap across countries, one may encounter a generational gap which proves to be a more elusive concept than one might expect. While a senior teacher today may want to develop discourse arising from the context of oppression, dictatorship, deprivation or narrow-minded resistance to progress, the comfortable teenager growing up in a sheltered European Union democracy may find such challenges irrelevant. Instead, the teacher looking to challenge their class with crude imagery, harsh realities or otherwise strong language may find the class put off or negatively triggered: with no harsh realities in their actual experience, they find that the messenger, the director of that enactment is the only abuser in sight. Similarly, the very passion and rebelliousness that one may expect of teenagers could be differently flavoured for a generation used to purging energies through the entertainment industry and social media in particular, often resulting in simply less evident energy and more apathy.

Social media content and entertainment references may prove a challenge in itself. If teacher and students fail to share the same experiences in that sense, they will find that connotations are ascribed by students where none were intended or even understood by the teacher. Even gestures may gain unintended meanings, as in the case where the coursebook teaches that biting lips is a sign of fear or concern, but students are taken back to films where this is a sensuous erotic message. The N-word could prove to be taboo for students otherwise quite racist toward historically oppressed minorities such as

the Roma in Europe, which confuses teachers as to how much racial awareness is needed in their classes. This and other issues are shaped by largely American developments, making European students better prepared for life in the US than in their home town.

Whatever the gap, it remains clear that today's EFL teacher is tasked with re-building awareness with each new generation of students and exercising care as to what shapes students' response and readiness for adult life, without unwarranted judgment or discrimination.