Knowing How to Curse:  
British Cultural Studies and EFL

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Introduction

The issue that this paper investigates has recently been succinctly commented on by a leading proponent of cultural studies in language learning in the following terms: ‘There is a growing concern within foreign language teaching (FLT) with the ways in which language learning is related to cultural learning . . . Yet this concern has not been explicitly related to the developments in Cultural Studies,’ (Byram, 1997).

There are already many well-established approaches for developing strategies in language learning, but those for acquiring an understanding of culture are much less clearly identified. There is little doubt that there is a pressing need for such strategies. In their influential book *Teaching-and-Learning Language-and-Culture*, Byram and Morgan report on empirical studies which have shown that the educational potential of language-and-culture teaching is not being fulfilled. Their research demonstrated that young people acquire some *information* but very little *knowledge* of the foreign culture through language classes. They conclude that the influence of extra-curricular forces such as the media is greater — and more insidious — than the intuitive and unsystematic efforts of most English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teachers (Byram and Morgan, 1994). Offering further evidence of the inefficacy of EFL cultural studies, Cain and her associates have shown that stereotypical views of other cultures and peoples are tenacious and scarcely differentiated during the process of language learning in the classroom (Cain, 1991). Despite these and other empirical findings, conceptual research has continued to argue most persuasively that language teaching has a significant role in developing young people’s critical awareness of their own and other societies (Melde, 1987) and in moving them into more advanced thinking as citizens with clearer political understanding (Doyé, 1993). There have been many attempts by language planners to incorporate a cultural dimension in language learning. For example, the revised National Curriculum for England and Wales specifies that one of the educational purposes of foreign language teaching is ‘to develop pupils’ understanding of themselves and their own culture,’ (DES, 1990). Two major innovations of the National Curriculum are the introduction of the concept of ‘cultural awareness’ and the recommendations for a comparative methodology. These define cultural awareness as ‘the promotion of understanding of and respect for other cultures . . . One of the most important aims of modern language studies.’ Furthermore, it
is the explicit aim of the Curriculum that this awareness can then be used by learners 'to
develop a more objective view of their own customs and ways of thinking.' To this end
comparison between the learners' own way of life and that of the other language commu-
nity is viewed as an essential means to an understanding of both.

This paper is an attempt to show that not only should foreign language teachers be
concerned with teaching cultural studies, but that the approach offering the most pur-
chase on the cultural world and the best means of enabling learners to question and resist
that world is British Cultural Studies. Unlike conventional literary studies, Cultural Stu-
dies establishes a corpus of cultural artifacts, not in order to create a canon but to pro-
vide learners with 'texts' which they can analyze, criticize and deconstruct. For EFL
learners this will challenge and modify their existing understanding and be the means to-
wards a better understanding of a country and its society. Most importantly, the process
of working on cultural texts involves an understanding of otherness. This in turn impli-
citly challenges learners' taken-for-granted perceptions of themselves and their world.
This process simultaneously requires a reassessment of their perceptions of a specific
society and introduces the key notion of cultural relativity.

In making recommendations for any kind of curriculum innovation there are two con-
siderations that must be addressed. Firstly, we must be clear about the prime objectives
of the subject. In the case of British Cultural Studies there are at least three possibili-
ties; to expose students to a liberal-humanist perspective, Britain as a part of a particu-
lar tradition in Western civilization, Britain at its most humane; to use Britain as an in-
strument in social reconstruction, the basis of free markets and the bastion of democracy;
or to provide an example of a particular form of constantly deconstructing, constantly
criticizing and analyzing, constantly problematizing approach to cultural phenomena, in
which it is the academic approach that is distinctively British, rather than the content,
which is incidentally British, but really need not be. A failure to be clear about which of
these alternatives is to be chosen will have serious consequences for the success of a
cultural studies curriculum. It will be part of my object in this thesis to argue that there
are serious difficulties in trying to forge a compromise between them, and that in fact it
is the third option which deserves our attention. The second consideration relates to the
internal structure and organization of material to be included in the course. How much
are we concerned with 'knowledge about Britain'? How explicitly are we concerned with
affective factors, with encouraging students to admire and respect Britain? Are there
skills that we would expect students of British Studies to acquire? What should be the
scope and coverage of the course? In what sense can there be progression and what are
the appropriate modes of assessment?

The contribution of Cultural Studies is important because it takes EFL beyond train-
ing and into education. In this paper I wish to argue that if general purpose foreign lan-
guage teaching is to have any meaning then cultural studies for Japanese university lea-
ners of foreign languages should be focused on processes of analysis and criticism associ-
ated with the post-structuralist and cultural materialist approaches of contemporary Brit-
ish Cultural Studies.

The English Language and Literature Department of Nagoya Women's University has recently started offering a major specialization in British and American Cultural Studies, alongside the already existing majors in literature and linguistics. I have been responsible for establishing the new courses for this major and the present paper represents a survey of the theoretical and pedagogical concerns that informed the thinking behind them. The particular methodological approach that has been used in designing and teaching these courses and an analysis of its effectiveness will form the subject of a subsequent paper.

What is British Cultural Studies?

There is no authoritative consensus regarding what constitutes either Cultural Studies in general or British Cultural Studies in particular. Proponents of Cultural Studies have deliberately resisted demands for definition, preferring instead to proclaim it a process-oriented interdisciplinary activity. Nevertheless, two approaches can be discerned. First there is the 'insider' perspective of British scholars themselves whose main focus is on an oppositional, decentralised critique of British culture. Second there is the 'outsider' perspective of foreigners who seek to describe and understand Britain and the British. In the German Landeskunde and French civilisation courses we find an emphasis on British institutions: the law, the economy, the monarchy etc. This contrasts markedly with the now dominant insider cultural analysis approach in Britain associated primarily with the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies at Birmingham University. Perhaps not surprisingly the teaching of culture in ELT in Japan as elsewhere has tended towards the outsider approach, even when taught by natives of the culture in question. Indeed this approach is not without support even from academic 'insiders'. David Punter for example is explicit in saying that it is not cultural studies in the broadest sense of that term, nor 'the study or relaying of that particular form of cultural approach which we may refer to as the "British school" of cultural studies' that we should be teaching (Punter, 1997). But it may be argued that the chief value of having cultural studies courses taught by natives of the country concerned is precisely that this does provide learners with access to 'insider' perspectives whatever the perspective taken in the formal curriculum. These two understandings of what British Cultural Studies means each have a complex history. They are shaped by different forces and if confused can pull the content and methods of any unreflective new course in conflicting directions. While the possibility of finding common ground is currently the subject of considerable scholarly debate in Britain and Europe it is certainly less than clear that the two perspectives can be easily reconciled. My opinion is that in the Japanese university ELT context there is indeed an overwhelming need to emphasize the insider perspective as a means of promoting the wider educational goals of learner autonomy, independence and empowerment.

In a concise overview in Bassnett's recent collection, Studying British Cultures (1997),
Antony Easthope divides the history of British Cultural Studies into the following three stages, each offering a different critique of the dominant ideological formations of contemporary society.

**Culturalism (1960-69)** This stage is exemplified by the earlier works of the founding fathers of the field, Raymond Williams, E. P. Thompson and Richard Hoggart, and is characterized by a moralizing humanism which seeks a new space for working class culture rather than directly challenging the dominant culture itself. It is typically Anglo-Saxon in its empirical, pragmatic and almost completely atheoretical approach.

**Marxist Structuralism (1970-79)** This stage followed as a rejection of the earlier humanistic tendency of Culturalism and the search for a grounding in theory, which it found most effectively in the structural Marxism of Louis Althusser. This is the position most closely associated with Stuart Hall during his tenure as director of the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies. The problem with this approach is that, committed as it is to a conception of totality, it presupposes its own point of origin as unsituated, somehow above the struggle. However, the sense of a total perspective on culture, objective structures and subjective positions together, was gained at the price of the omission from that totality of two crucial aspects of subjectivity in the cultural studies problematic: ordinary people are treated as simply duped by the texts they enjoy, offering no resistance to them, while superior people (cultural theorists, that is) have a supernatural immunity to the structures they describe.

**Post-Structuralism and Cultural Materialism (since 1980)** This latest stage, a reaction to the death of Grand Narratives and totalizing systematics as expressed by Structuralism, is strongly informed by feminist and psychoanalytic notions of the decentred subject. They both involve the rejection of any positivist ideas of objectivity, so that the point of view of any writer or spectator is always inscribed in their account of anything. This means that whatever we study, our own subjectivity is a crucial element. From now on, there is no truth with a capital T. The resultant state of contemporary life that has developed from this is what is now referred to as postmodernism. Cultural Materialism is a similar critique, differing in being derived from the work of Michel Foucault and possessed of a greater political awareness related to the later work of Raymond Williams.

Across these variations British Cultural Studies has struggled to find an analytically coherent theoretical frame within which to hold together both text and society, culture as subjective experience and culture as objective structure. No such synthesis has been found, but this does not mean we should abandon Cultural Studies. As Easthope suggests, cultural studies has got it right. 'On one side, there can be no return to the naive subjectivism of traditional literary study. On the other, at present, we are still faced with a practice in the social sciences and study of history which remains locked in some positivist notion of a 'science of history', and analysis of the social formation as an impersonal and 'objective' phenomenon . . . When historical study thoroughly takes on board the idea of subjectivity as here described . . . Then it will have developed into . . . cultural studies.'
Having addressed the question of what British Cultural Studies is, we must turn to the more contentious question of why British Cultural Studies? It is perhaps ironic that British Cultural Studies are being promoted at a time when the concept of 'Britishness' is much disputed. It is not accidental that interest in studying British culture has begun to develop so rapidly during the last decade. As Martin Montgomery has observed, the late twentieth century manifests two overriding tendencies: an increased interpenetration of cultures on the one hand, and the steady rise of regionalism, sometimes in extreme and dangerously nationalistic forms, on the other (Montgomery, 1993). The British situation provides a particularly interesting case-study of a society in transformation at the end of the twentieth century.

Nevertheless, the concept 'British Cultural Studies' raises a number of problems for educators who locate themselves within the left-liberal tradition which historically offered as an ideal the opportunity for education to contribute to the improvement of the world both by overcoming nationalism and by advancing equality between nations. The way in which British Cultural Studies has come to conveniently fill the vacuum created by the relative displacement of English Literature as the cultural component of EFL has posed a challenge to this tradition at the same time that it has developed from it. It has been helped in achieving its preeminent role by its convenience to a larger political agenda in which, as part of British government efforts in favour of 'buying British' and 'battling for Britain', the English language is seen as one more exportable resource and as an opportune conduit for the dissemination of British cultural values. Linking EFL to some version of unique 'Britishness' also offers an edge in an increasingly competitive international language teaching market. Clearly, any discussion of the teaching (or learning) of British culture therefore poses acute ideological problems. Notwithstanding the risks of promoting a new version of 'little Englandism' cultural imperialism, the educational value of British Cultural Studies cannot be denied. In the courses I have designed at Nagoya Women's University it is the approach that is British (in origin, although now taking root in many other centres around the world) not the focus of study.

Towards a Theory of British Cultural Studies and EFL

One of the fundamental questions that has preoccupied theorists in foreign language learning is: what kind of knowledge is required for an understanding of another culture? As the discussion in the previous section has shown, knowledge of culture varies and there can be no consensus. All knowledge is 'interested' and perhaps the best that can be hoped for is to raise awareness of this fact. In the past, culture had been seen as the preserve of English literature but now, as Alan Durant has noted, it is a commonplace within the European academy that British Cultural Studies, with its pluralistic and anti-canonical approach, has taken over from English Literature as the cultural component of English as a foreign language courses. Although in Japan the English literature theocracy still exercises disproportionate influence it seems that here too matters may slowly be
changing. Indeed, Japanese universities may be about to join the party just in time to enjoy the fruits of a nascent rapprochement between cultural studies, literary studies and foreign language study. This phenomenon may be seen as part of a wider process that is seeing greater emphasis placed on cultural awareness in many fields, including management and business studies, law, economics and the sciences.

The system of cultural references or framework of knowledge that ELT provides for learners is seldom theoretically well-founded and is often merely a listing of surface phenomena — even when related to underlying common human experiences. ELT does not put sufficient emphasis on critical understanding based on analysis and deconstruction. The significant factors in the life of a society are the ideologies which determine its values and influence the direction of its development and change. Communication in the language and culture of that society is dependent on apprehension of these ideologies, not the adoption of surface behaviour. If ELT is to claim a general educational aim of extending learner's critical understanding of societal phenomena in their own and foreign countries, it needs to take more seriously the methods and contents of study proposed by Cultural Studies. Cultural knowledge in EFL contexts is often considered to consist of networks of facts. Yet what we conventionally call cultural 'facts' are merely representations, and as such are already mediated by previous interpretation. Because of their mediated character, cultural 'facts' present ELT courses with the unavoidable issue of their means of presentation, including the key question of point of view. Understanding such means of representation involves developing skills in looking beyond the surface sense of texts or situations in order to take into account the rhetorical or stylistic techniques involved in their making. Priority in EFL British Cultural Studies should accordingly be given not only to the accumulation or presentation of 'facts' but to ways of developing skills in interpreting or 'reading' such facts.

Byram has attempted a definition of the sociocultural competence which language learners need as part of an overall 'intercultural communicative competence'. This is based on the concept of the 'intercultural speaker: the foreign language learner as a social actor whose interaction with others is coloured by the social identities he/she brings to communicative situations and how those identities are perceived by other speakers of the language, both natives and non-natives,' (Byram, 1997). He delineates four dimensions to such sociocultural competence:

- **savoir-être** 'an affective capacity to relinquish ethnocentric attitudes towards and perceptions of otherness and a cognitive ability to establish and maintain a relationship between native cultures and foreign cultures.'

- **savoir-apprendre** 'an ability to produce and operate an interpretative system with which to gain insight into hitherto unknown cultural meanings, beliefs and practices.'

- **savoirs** 'a system of cultural references which structures the implicit and explicit knowledge acquired in the course of linguistic and cultural learning, and which takes into account the specific needs of the learner in her interaction with the foreign language.'

- **savoir-faire** 'a capacity to integrate savoir-être, savoir-apprendre and savoirs in specific
situations of bicultural contact.

Byram comments that ‘this definition focuses as much on the process of communication as upon the acquired platform of knowledge and skills upon which communication takes place.’ It should also be noted that this definition was developed in the Western European context without the intention to extend the argument to the global context. Nevertheless it is a worthwhile exercise to attempt the application of it to the Japanese university context.

**Teaching How to Curse**

Because of the complexity of the problems of defining Britishness, it is perhaps easiest to regard Britain, as agencies such as the British Council commonly do, as a set of facts (about geography, economics, law, literature etc). Yet a catalogue of given facts does not in itself constitute a serious curriculum area. Without a carefully thought-through teaching methodology, such an approach risks being no more than intellectual tourism, or high-grade stereotyping. The contributors to Bassnett’s volume (1997) all argue for closer integration between factual material and the observer’s point of view. Meaning, they concur, is constructed not found, hence it is fundamentally important to examine ways in which meanings develop and how they circulate. The study of British culture, therefore, cannot be simply an examination of facts and institutions, it must also involve a study of the discourses that shape them.

On the other hand, there have been a number of criticisms of the kind of Cultural Studies that I am advocating from the point of view of EFL. It has been noted for example that Cultural Studies theory pays little or no attention to leaning processes as such, and appears to assume only cognitive models of learning in common with much university-level teaching. In particular, Cultural Studies discourse does not work with explicit learning theories and does not include discussion of teaching methods and learning styles appropriate to different kinds of classroom interaction. As Byram suggests, ‘Cultural Studies needs to develop appropriate methods for this specific learning situation. Even advanced students are not native speakers, and are continuing to acquire the language — new structures, new genres, new vocabulary — as they study new aspects of culture,’ (Byram, 1997). Byram also criticizes Cultural Studies for its parochialism and its excessive emphasis on the ‘insider’ as both subject and reader. Conversely, he criticizes the simplistic assumptions about culture that often underlie foreign language teaching where the emphasis is on an uncritical reading of surface phenomena.

In contrast with the situation in EFL, it is striking how little discussion of learning issues actually appears in published accounts of British Cultural Studies. A wide range of Introductions, Readers and Handbooks now exits offering instruction in content to students but there is no practical guide on how to teach. Thus we have a paradox: while most discussion of EFL British Cultural Studies has concentrated on ways and means of ‘presenting’ one or other of the many possible critical perspectives on Britain, unless we
are able to clarify exactly what kind of study activity a particular course is practicing, and how this relates to the previous understanding of the learners, the presentation risks being educationally ineffective. As a first step towards addressing this problem the following three constraints for the cultural studies teacher have been identified by Brumfit (1997). First, a selection has to be made from the mass of possible subject matter; second, the process of teaching and learning requires that the selection is given some organizing principle(s) to enable learners to come to grips with it at all; and third, criteria for the selection and organization must include explicit (rather than as frequently is the case, implicit) goals for the learners to achieve.

There is a general consensus on the need to allow learners to construct their own meanings by a process of engagement with appropriate data. Further, learners need ways to integrate their new understanding with the set of categories they are already using to deal with previous experience: thus learning depends on an interaction between the old and the new. Consequently, methodological emphasis needs to be placed on discussion and problem-solving at least as much as on the presentation of information. In such workshop-based classes, it seems desirable to emphasize, rather than disguise, questions of point of view. Durant takes the view that the pedagogic focus of British Cultural Studies courses should be largely on discourse in order to maintain a close link with EFL and suggests that ‘topics’ or ‘themes’ would be appropriate syllabus-organizing devices. However, the value of such discourse study lies finally in how effectively it supports development of a combined form of communicative and cultural competence — or set of relevant intuitions and skills — as much as in its provision of specific cultural knowledge about Britain and an excessive emphasis on applied linguistics many not be the best approach. Similarly, Montgomery sees a way of relating the concerns of the insider and outsider approaches in a study of language as a social institution (Montgomery, 1993). Variation according to user is, he suggests, variation of identity, particularly by class, gender and region. Variation according to use is more closely tied in to institutions. He suggests that in the EFL Cultural Studies class the study of dialectal variation can contribute to a concern for cultural analysis, while institutional analysis can be supported by a concern for genres and registers. However, the problem with this solution is that it associates both approaches with the notion of data as ‘given’, while proponents of the cultural studies approach I am advocating have a more fundamental agenda associated with the critical discourse movement (Fairclough, 1989). For advocates of this form of cultural studies, part of the teacher’s role is to expose the power relations underlying varying social discourses, and to show the workings of the competitive and political manoeuvres that underlie apparently innocent linguistic and social relationships.

In the light of the foregoing discussion, one further point should here be mentioned. As Celia Roberts, formerly a coworker of Byram’s at Thames Valley University, has noted, while the critical theory and textual deconstruction of much cultural studies work is being slowly but gradually appropriated by language studies, one element that has hitherto been missing is ethnography (Roberts, 1994). At British universities, the one
year period of residence abroad which is an obligatory element of virtually all modern languages degree programs provides a unique opportunity for cultural learning. Roberts' students take a preparatory course modelled on the kind of program an anthropologist might need if she were to undertake an ethnographic study overseas. Roberts reports that her students are attracted by the novelty of the approach, the systematic treatment of cultural concepts and the experience-based ethnographic project work.

The main way through most of the paradoxes that have been identified in this paper is, I believe, through a recognition that EFL Cultural Studies must in the end be a comparative activity. It is for this reason that the way forward offered by Byram seems most worthy of investigation. He is interested in developing students' abilities to analyze and comment on culture, both in their own and in the foreign environment, but what makes his approach significant is the central role of learners' understanding of their own cultures. Consequently, this is the approach that has been adopted at Nagoya Women's University and discussion of the details of these courses will form the subject of a subsequent paper.

Conclusion

In conclusion I would like to emphasize the relationship of both British Cultural Studies and EFL to the idea of political education. If 'education' is taken to include critical reflection on social and natural phenomena, then 'political education' can truly describe the critical understanding of native and foreign cultures and societies to which foreign language education contributes. Where foreign language education is successful in developing learners' grasp of otherness and their moral evaluation of their own and others' perspectives, through cognitive and affective reciprocity, then the relationship with political education is created. Comparison is not only a technique for highlighting similarities and differences as a means of making them more perceptible. It also serves as a step towards the acceptance of other perspectives, and the valuing of those perspectives as equally acceptable within their own terms. An evaluation of learners' own society and culture from that other perspective may then lead to a critical distancing and decentring from it. Clearly, whenever teachers compare social phenomena, explain historical context and describe material situations in their treatment of texts with students, they also introduce a political dimension to their teaching. This is inevitable and less a matter for regret than for grasping as an opportunity to embrace a radical critical pedagogy. The injustices and inequalities suffered by individuals in education and throughout social life as a consequence of their social class, gender or ethnic origin are still among the most significant political problems at the end of the twentieth century. They are inevitably highly visible to the critical gaze created through comparative language and culture teaching, which turns learners' attention as much on their own society and culture as on the foreign one. For learners who themselves suffer injustices and inequalities, the issues are not merely academic, and language and culture teaching can give them the perspective from which
they have a better understanding of their own situation. As Karl Marx might have said, EFL practitioners have only interpreted the world in various ways; the point is to change it.

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