

## **A Critique of the Concept of 'Culture' in the EFL/ESL Literature: alternative approaches to the understanding of 'Culture'**

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### **□ ABSTRACT □**

The ELT/EFL literature contains a good number of papers and articles reporting the attempt to apply a new methodology or a learning approach- such as the communicative approach during the 90s and learner autonomy recently- in a country different from that where it has been developed. The target country is a non-European one in most cases. Most of these reported attempts have ended either in humble results or in total failure. This is often attributed by researchers solely to the values of the national culture of the target country which are often described as opposing the principles of the new methodology, affecting all the students of this county evenly all the time and, therefore, constraining the application of the new methodology. In most of these cases the researchers end up suggesting either 'corrective training' to help the students 'get rid of these national values' or withdrawing completely from applying the new methodology or approach.

Therefore, this paper aims at reviewing 'the standard view' of the concept of 'culture' in the ELT literature and at offering alternative understandings of this concept which could help researchers see factors other than the national culture affecting the application of a new methodology, and which (i.e. the factors)- if taken into consideration- would significantly help in the appropriation of a new teaching methodology or learning approach.

**Key words:** culture, the other, discourse, large culture, small culture

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## نقد لمفهوم الثقافة في أدب تعليم اللغة الانكليزية كلغة أجنبية: مقاربات بديلة

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### □ ملخص □

يحتوي أدب تعليم اللغة الانكليزية كلغة أجنبية على عدد كبير من المقالات والأوراق البحثية التي تتمحور حول محاولات تطبيق منهجية تعليم جديدة أو مقارنة جديدة للتعليم حرفياً مثل المنهج التواصلية خلال فترة التسعينات من القرن الماضي أو استقلالية المتعلم حديثاً في بلد مختلف عن البلد حيث تم تطوير هذه المنهجية - بلد غير أوروبي في معظم الحالات.

معظم هذه الحالات انتهت إما بنتائج متواضعة جداً أو بفشل كامل. غالباً ما عزى الباحثون هذا الفشل فقط لقيم الثقافة الوطنية لهذا البلد والتي غالباً ما توصف كقيم تتناقض بمبادئ المنهجية الجديدة وتؤثر على كل طلاب هذا البلد بنفس الدرجة كل الوقت وبالنتيجة كقيم تحد من تطبيق المنهجية الجديدة. في معظم هذه الحالات ينتهي الباحثون إلى اقتراح إما ما يسمى "التدريب التصحيحي" لمساعدة الطلاب على التخلص من القيم الثقافية الوطنية أو الانسحاب كلياً من تطبيق المنهجية أو المقاربة الجديدة.

وبناءً على ذلك تهدف هذه المقالة إلى مراجعة الفهم المعياري لمفهوم الثقافة في أدب تعليم اللغة الانكليزية وإلى تقديم طرق فهم بديلة لهذا المفهوم والتي من الممكن أن تساعد الباحثين على رؤية عوامل غير الثقافة الوطنية تؤثر في تطبيق المنهجية الجديدة والتي (هذه العوامل) إذا ما أخذت بعين الاعتبار قد تساهم بشكل كبير في عملية توطين المنهجيات أو المقاربات الجديدة لتعلم وتعليم اللغة الانكليزية كلغة أجنبية.

**الكلمات المفتاحية:** الثقافة، الآخر، الخطاب، الثقافة الكبيرة، الثقافات الصغيرة

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## Introduction

The importance of the concept of culture emerges from the fact that it is at the heart of any research based on the qualitative ethnographic paradigm. This is particularly important in the field of ELT, since a good number of the studies investigating into the appropriacy of a particular teaching methodology or learning approach in a particular context are ethnographic in nature. This article starts with a definition of 'culture' and 'culture of learning'. Then, there will be a critique of the concept of 'culture' as it is tackled in the ELT/ ESL/EFL literature. This will be carried out through analysing a paper by Flowerdew and Miller (1995). The article shows too how non-Western students are discursively constructed and how this construction is circulated as part and parcel of the Western politics of hegemony. Further, the present article suggests an alternative paradigm that allows for a multi-dimensional interpretation of reality. In its final part the article sheds light on the concept of 'individual agency' in an attempt to show the role played by individuals in the interpretation, negotiation and reproduction of cultural meanings.

## Culture of learning

Culture has been described as 'one of the spongiest words in social sciences' (Miller, 1993. p. 177). Kneller's (1965, p. 4) definition of culture could be primarily useful. Kneller defines culture as 'the total shared way of life of a given people, comprising their modes of thinking, acting and feeling which are expressed, for instance, in religion, law, language, art, and custom, as well as in material products such as houses, clothes, and tools.' This definition provides us with some elements that are essential for the study of culture: a way of life; social groups of people sharing this way of life; practices and systems expressing the way of life (religion, law); products and tools related to this culture (houses, clothes). Palfreyman (2003 a) argues that though kneller's definition is concerned with everyday life and practices, yet when these practices, systems, cultural products and tools are seen in the light of the learning process we can speak of 'culture of learning'. Based on this argument Palfreyman offers us a framework for analyzing a culture of learning which is useful for the focus of our study, that is, learner autonomy. According to this framework, a culture of learning could be broken down to these elements: 'a community' sharing the culture (classroom, department, college, institute), 'learning practices' (lecture, seminars, office hours) and associated roles (teachers, learners), systems structuring learning (the assessment system), 'tools' and 'products' (library, textbooks, assignments) (Palfreyman, 2003 a. p.6). In studying the culture of learning, I would consider these practices, systems, products and tools as elements through which people's behaviour can be observed, since behaviour is an essential source of data. For as Geertz puts it, 'behaviour must be attended to, and with some exactness, because it is through the flow of behaviour- or, more precisely, social action, that cultural forms find articulation' (Geertz, 1973. p.17). Actually, this is not enough. Geertz describes culture as 'the imaginative universe within which [people's] acts are signs' (Ibid). This means that in order for people's behaviour to be understood we have to investigate into the meanings and significance that people attribute to various practices, systems, products and tools, that is, people's interpretations. In this regard, Geertz argues that:

Culture consists of socially established structure of meaning in terms of which people do such things as signal conspiracies and join them, or perceive insults and answer them (1973, pp.19-20).

In this sense, ‘signalling conspiracies’ or perceiving insults’ are social acts and they draw their meanings from people’s interpretation rather than from empirical features. Accordingly, the learning practices and products in any educational institute can be considered as signs to be observed and which have meanings and interpretations, which are more or less shared and attributed to them by people working or learning there. Therefore, in studying learner autonomy, for example, in a particular setting we can ask these questions: what interpretations and significance do different parties in the institute attribute to lecture, seminars, projects, and exams? How different parties in the institute interpret learner/teacher responsibility in general and learner autonomy in particular? And to what extent is learner autonomy -as they interpret it- a meaningful reference point in their interpretations of the above mentioned practices, events and products? Studying learner autonomy as people in a particular setting interpret it across a range of learning practices and events is to study it by building what Geertz terms as ‘thick description’.

### **‘Culture’ in ESL/EFL and Applied Linguistics**

In this section I will try to critically analyze the concept of culture as perceived by Flowerdew and Miller (1995). My choice of this paper is justified by, first, the way ‘culture’ is perceived in this paper which is standard to the fields mentioned above as we will see later; and second, by the way by which this standard view is introduced to us, and which may appear for the first instance as opposing the standard view while it is not.

Flowerdew and Miller (1995) argue that ‘culture’ plays an important role in the ethnographic research in particular since the aim of this kind of research is to develop an interpretive- exploratory account of people’ behaviour in a particular setting. The aim of their study is to provide an account of the culture of L2 lectures through describing and explaining students’ as well as teachers’ behaviour. After studying L2 lectures at a Hong Kong university, the conclusion they arrive at is that there are four dimensions of the notion of culture. These include: the ethnic culture, ‘culturally based, social, psychological features which affect the behaviour of lecturers and students; local culture, ‘the local setting with which students are familiar and which may be alien to foreign lecturers; academic culture, ‘features of the lecture situation which require an understanding of the particular academic values, assumptions, roles, and so on of a given society’; and disciplinary culture, ‘the theories, concepts, norms, terms and so on specific to a particular academic discipline’ (Flowerdew and Miller, 1995. p.346).

In broadening ‘culture’ to include areas other than nation, Flowerdew and Miller are able to multiply the cultural influences that affect students’ and teachers’ behaviour and to see some of the problems faced by students as being caused by elements other than the national culture. For example, the problem of students not being able to understand the concepts explained by the expatriate teachers is accounted for as being caused by the teachers giving examples based on their experience outside Hong Kong with which students are unfamiliar. Another problem, discussed under the heading of disciplinary culture, is that certain disciplines may have a huge amount of new jargons which may not have equivalents in the students’ mother tongue, the thing which may be a source of linguistic problem precluding students’ understanding of the lectures. However, Flowerdew and Miller’s conceptualization of ‘culture’ came under critique by Atkinson (1999) who argues that ‘each of the four cultural dimensions is portrayed as a more or less static, unproblematic, homogenous entity in itself’ (p.362). Flowerdew and Miller seem to multiply the concept of culture without questioning the understanding of the concept itself. We may agree with Atkinson’s statement especially if we know that the researchers’ attempt to ascribe an instance of behaviour to this cultural dimension or that, instead of

interpreting it as being affected by a multiplicity of cultural influences, proves to be difficult- the thing which they actually admit (Flowerdew and Miller, 1995. p.362). This difficulty stems from that each dimension is portrayed as a sealed, self-contained one neither affecting nor affected by other dimensions or other external influences. Consequently, their interpretation of certain instances of behaviour comes in the form of simplified, uni-dimensional picture. A clear example of this is the Hong Kong students' silence in the classroom. These students are introduced to us by the two researchers as passive, silent ones holding a negative attitude to participation, and the reason for this 'negativity' of students lies, according to the two researchers, in the ethnic Chinese culture and the Confucian teachings on the need to respect the authority of the teacher, to maintain face, and not to show off. Ironically speaking, the data offered by the two researchers in the same study provides us with the very evidence that these students are neither passive nor silent: 'The noise level... tends to be higher than most lecturers are used to and can be quite distracting' (p.363). it may be true that students are very active in the social interaction of the classroom and do not participate in the pedagogical part of the lecture, yet this may be due to many reasons other than the ethnic culture, the heading under which the researchers discuss this problem. Again, these reasons appear in the data provided in the paper and which the two researchers are unable to relate to the problem due to the static framework in which each of their cultural dimensions is depicted. These may include the teaching style which may sound strange to the students and which may raise tension among them which in turn could prevent them from participation; or the lack of technical terms by which students can express themselves, an issue many lecturers are aware of but refuse to deal with since this 'for them would constitute English teaching something many of them stated in their interviews they considered not to be part of their job' (p.366). The last point I would make here, and which is particularly interesting, is the way ethnic culture, the Chinese one here, appears in this study. Through their definition of ethnic culture, the social and psychological features which affect the behaviour of the students and which may contrast with the social and psychological makeup of the Western lecturers, Flowerdew and Miller stick to the dichotomy that for long existed in the literature of language teaching and applied linguistics between Western cultures and Eastern ones. According to this dichotomy 'rigid cultural boundaries' are drawn between these cultures and labels such as 'individualization', 'self-expression, critical and analytic thinking' are given to Western cultures, while 'collectivism', 'group work', 'teacher dependence' and 'memorization' are given to the Eastern ones (Kubota, 1999). Flowerdew and Miller depict the Hong Kong students, whose academic culture 'diverges from Western norms' (Flowerdew and Miller, 1995. p. 363), as lacking in terms of 'original thought', 'critical analysis' and self-expression because for the Chinese students, as the two researchers presuppose, 'the teacher is viewed as an authority who is not to be questioned', a feature endorsed by the Confucian teachings. Underlying this presumption are two principles: first, the Hong Kong students' national culture, which is in sharp contrast with the Western culture, is deficient and represents a major constraint for any attempt to promote 'Western ideals' such as independence, critical thought, self-expression and originality of thought; second, culture is viewed as an entity that systematically and evenly determines the way its members talk, think or behave. Analyzed in this way, Flowerdew and Miller's conceptualization of culture becomes much closer to what Atkinson classifies as 'the received view of culture' (Atkinson, 1999). Atkinson argues that this view dominates most of TESOL literature and he defines it as the 'notion of culture(s) that sees them in their most typical forms as geographically (and quite often nationally) distinct entities, as

relatively unchanging and homogeneous, and as all-encompassing systems of rules or norms that substantially determines personal behaviour' (p. 696).

To sum it all, a number of features seem to characterize Flowerdew and Miller's discussion of culture:

**a.** Culture is often understood in terms of large nations or ethnicities (though Flowerdew and Miller multiply the notion of culture yet they remain entrapped in the understanding of culture, just mentioned, through their endorsement of the dichotomization of Western and Eastern cultures.

**b.** Culture, whether national, academic or disciplinary, is represented as static, unchanging and homogeneous entity.

**c.** Culture systematically determines the behaviour, attitudes and perceptions of its members.

This understanding of culture is not exclusively Flowerdew and Miller's. Several researchers (e.g. Palfreyman, 2001, 2003a. Kubota, 1999, 2001, 2002; Holliday, 1994, 1999, 2003; Holliday *et.al*, 2004) talk of the prevalence of such an understanding in fields such as ESL/EFL and applied linguistics. Palfreyman argues that ELT literature often represents 'culture' depending on what he calls 'the predictive cultural overview'. This perspective, argues Palfreyman, characterizes disciplines which consider culture 'primarily as an external constraint, whose obstructive effect on practitioners [such as teachers and students] should be minimized' (Palfreyman, 2001. p.26). According to Palfreyman, this perspective is characterized by its emphasis on the link between culture and large ethnic and national groups, and by its consideration of the culture of any group as 'monolithic', and 'undifferentiated' (p.27). Therefore, this view emphasizes the influence of national culture on people's behaviour at the expense of many other micro-level influences, and sees culture as 'static' and as 'coherent entity that can be used to predict and account for people's behaviour in a variety of social contexts, based in this on the assumption that the set of norms, rules and values constituting a national culture is equally influential in different situations and that it solely determines people' behaviour. Palfreyman goes on to argue that this set of norms and values is not untrue and that it really 'serves to make certain observations and experiences explicable', yet what it offers is a 'simplified' and uni-dimensional picture that ignores the complex of other influences at play in a specific social context, the same influences that lead to changes in people's behaviour in different situations or when they move from one group to another playing different roles or going through different affiliations (Palfreyman, 2001). What is really implied in Palfreyman is that national culture is in fact influential, yet its influence is not even and systematic in different situations. Depending solely on an established set of national traits in interpreting people's behaviour would lead us to a picture of simplified and uni-dimensional society and to the endorsement of the process of stereotyping, and hence the will to dichotomization of cultures as we will see next.

### **Discursive Construction**

There is a body of literature that goes a step further by arguing that we should not take the understandings of certain cultures in the ELT and applied linguistics literature for granted, because these understandings, far from being a reflection of objective truths, are, rather, discursive constructions. Like Palfreyman, Kubota's (1999, 2001) argument suggests that much of the argument in recent applied linguistics promotes the notion of cultures as 'monolithic', 'fixed', and 'deterministic'. But she tackles this issue from another angle, that is, the discursive construction of culture itself. In her argument, Kubota

is concerned with how Eastern cultures are perceived and represented in the West and USA as the 'Other', a negative one indeed. In her analysis of many studies in this regard, Kubota points out that these studies draw on certain 'perceived cultural differences' to speak about Western and Eastern cultures in terms of fixed, unchanging and dichotomous categories. Kubota argues that these studies are based on the conception that 'a certain culture can be represented by distinctive labels that are completely different from those used to describe another culture' (Kubota, 1999. p.16). These labels, argues Kubota, become the constituents of knowledge about a particular culture and it is circulated as a truth. The point that Kubota wants to make here is that this kind of knowledge can be viewed as 'neither true nor objective but rather as discursive construction in which power is circulated, exercised and attached to a particular form of knowledge' (1999. p.16). In this sense, cultural representation can be seen as a political practice and a 'will to truth'. Kubota backs up her argument with Foucault's (1980) one. Foucault points out that this kind of knowledge is organized as 'regimes of truth'. He defines this concept as 'the ensemble of rules according to which the true and false are separated and specific effects of power are attached to the true'. He then argues that any one of these regimes is 'linked in a circular relation with systems of power which produce and sustain it' (Foucault, 1980. pp. 132-133). In an earlier argument, Foucault (1978) argues that 'it is in discourse that power and knowledge are joined together' (p.100). Building on this, Kubota argues that the cultural representation of the Asian cultures in TESOL and applied linguistics as the 'Other' of the Western cultures as well as the rigid categories that symbolise a dichotomy between them and which 'create and perpetuate, rather than reflect cultural differences', are all constructed by a discourse which is 'the past-present continuity' of the discourses of colonialism, namely, Orientalism (Kubota, 1999.). Said (1978- 1993) discusses the issue of the politics of the colonial representation of the 'non-western' people extensively and argues that the colonial discourse is keen to produce, reproduce and sustain unequal power relations with the non-western peoples and their cultures through certain politics of colonial representation that seeks 'othering' these people, constructing them as what the West/norm is not, as primitive and inferior to the West and in need of civilizing and, above all, as unchanging, thus creating a perpetuated Western authority over them. Said points out how Orientalism assumes 'unchanging Orient, absolutely different...from the West' (Said, 1978. p.26).

Kubota (1999-2001) critiques the way ESL/EFL students are otherized by the essentialization of their cultures and the construction of often- negative, reductive cultural labels to depict them and their cultures, which all run in contrast to the images that depict the Western and USA cultures, students, classrooms as the ideal, the norm: 'The othering of ESL/EFL students by essentializing their culture and language presupposes the existence of the unproblematic Self as a monolithic, normative category' (Kubota, 2001. p.10). Essentialization is often defined as 'presuming that there is a universal essence, homogeneity and unity in a particular culture (Holliday et.al. 2004. p.2). The term 'reductive' is used to mean 'reducing cultural behaviour down to a simple casual factor' (Ibid).

Kubota critiques in particular the current TESOL discourse in which Asian students are constructed as lacking in autonomy and critical thinking, the components of effective pedagogy:

The intellectual qualities posed as ideal for U.S students are independence, autonomy and creativity, and students should ideally develop analytical, objective and critical

thinking skills. They are able to analyze, hypothesize, and evaluate in a rational manner. Their communication styles in classrooms are presumably assertive and direct.... They actively engage in classroom discussion by expressing their own opinions and questioning authority, whether it is a text, a teacher, or an established theory. These qualities are presented as diametrically opposed to the characteristics of Asian students, who are described intellectually as interdependent, inclined to preserve rather than create knowledge, reluctant to challenge authority and engage in memorization rather than analytical thinking.... Asian students allegedly plagiarize because they do not share the Western notion of text authorship that stresses originality, creativity and individualization. In terms of oral communication styles, Asian students are described as reticent, passive, indirect and not inclined to challenge the teacher's authority. (Kubota, 2001. p.14).

However, Kubota attempts to undo this view by arguing how U.S. educators, who report a 'crisis' in some U.S. secondary school and college classrooms, use the same negative terms that depict the Asian students to describe U.S. students: 'passive, docile, and compliant rather than active, creative and autonomous students', doing what the teacher tells them or expect them to do, with one thing in mind, to prepare for exam (Kubota, 2001. pp.19-20). Kubota argues that the similarity between these negative images of U.S. students and the ones depicting the Asian students just mentioned above raise the question of whether the educational practices in the United States are distinct from those in Asia and, by implication, whether any problems faced by Asian students are caused by their national cultures only or by a multiplicity of other influences coming from the atmosphere of the classroom or from the educational context in which they find themselves. Although Kubota argues that the images of U.S. students and classrooms are also discursively constructed- as it is indicated by the conflicting images mentioned above and which are constructed by discourses and researchers legitimating or challenging certain political and ideological positions within the United States- and although she puts an emphasis on the recognition of the 'organic and plural nature of culture' as it is 'influenced by political and ideological forces and intricate power relations within the culture and between cultures at a certain time', yet Kubota relates the discursive construction of the 'Other' to 'the persistent racism of contemporary society' (Kubota, 2001. p.28). But since the influence of power relations works within the same culture (i.e. towards people who are not racially different) is it then racism or something else?

However, Holliday, while agreeing with Kubota's argument as a whole, prefers to term this as 'culturism' instead of 'racism'. Holliday defines 'culturism' as the process of

reducing the foreign Other to simplistic, essentialist cultural prescriptions. Culturism is thus very like racism in that both reduce and judge a strange Other according to negative stereotypes, but different in that it applies to the othering of cultural groups which are not necessarily racially distinct (Holliday, 1999. p.245; *see also* Holliday, 2003. p.114; Holliday, 2004; 2005).

Holliday discusses culturism in the process of discussing essentialism and differentiating it from the anti-essentialist paradigm. This will be the idea of the next section. Yet before moving there it should be mentioned that the discussion mentioned above may imply that cultural differences do not exist whether within the same culture or between cultures, which is not actually the case. Therefore, I may argue here that cultural differences do really exist and people may have different preferences and experiences, yet



these differences should not be used to ‘feed chauvinistic imaginations about what people can or cannot do’ (Holliday et.al, 2004) or to reduce them to a set of stereotypes. This is because cultural differences exist between people who are members of the same cultural group. This is in fact what gives ‘culture’ its polyphonic, heterogeneous and developing nature. Thus, it is better to think of these differences in terms of tendencies.

### **Essentialism/anti-essentialism**

As it is implied in the argument cited above, most of the ELT and applied linguistics literature that tackled the idea of culture is dominated by a view that defines culture in terms of national culture and understands it as monolithic and static set of norms that determines the behaviour of the members of a particular culture. This understanding is manifested in identifying the national cultures of the foreign students as an obstacle, and the only one indeed, which face the implementation of ‘effective pedagogies’. Approaching culture in this way has, as we have seen, serious consequences manifested in: ignoring the variety of other factors that influence people behaviour, namely here, the teaching-learning process; offering a simplified picture of the societies of these students; and in the more or less explicit imposition of unequal power relations on them based on the inferiorization of these students along with their cultures. This is very obvious with the notion of learner autonomy in particular where, as we will see in the next section, certain features such as the tendency for collectivism or respect for the teacher authority, which are seen to characterize certain national cultures such as Confucianism or Arab culture, are interpreted as antithetical to learner autonomy, presupposed to determine the behaviour of all the students who come from these cultures in the same degree in different situations, and thus prevent the researchers in most cases from seeing these students as they are ( i.e. to be autonomous in their own way) or hide from them the complexity of influences that affect their autonomy. Therefore, we find in the literature arguments for retreat from autonomy (Jones, 1995), for seeking alternatives other than autonomy (Riley, 1988), or for culturally correcting and training foreign students in components of autonomy such as critical thinking (Atkinson, 1997).

However, along this line there emerged another line of argument in ELT featured by its emphasis on the importance of local educational forms and the need for appropriate ELT methodologies (Holliday, 1994). The notion of ‘culture’ is central to this line but it differs from the line discussed above in its conceptualization of ‘culture’ in two ways: the scope of culture and its nature. In this regard, Holliday (1999, 2004) differentiates between two paradigms: essentialism/culturism, which is seen as dominating most of the arguments in ELT and applied linguistics, and the less well-known anti-essentialist view of culture. At pinning down the characteristics of each paradigm, Holliday *et al.* (2004) argue that according to the essentialist view of culture:

- a. Culture is seen as a homogeneous entity whose features spread evenly, thus reflecting a picture of simple society.
- b. Culture is often linked to a country and language and is seen as having a Russian doll relationship with larger ‘continental’ or smaller local cultures.
- c. The world is conceived as being divided into ‘mutually exclusive national cultures’, and therefore people who belong to one culture are definitely different from people in another.
- d. People are seen as being exclusively members of one national culture.
- e. People’s behaviour is determined and constrained by the culture to which they belong.

While according to the anti-essentialist view of culture:

- a. culture is seen as a 'social force' and can relate to 'cohesive behaviour in activities' within any social group of any size or type for any period of time and can be featured by a discourse.
- b. Culture can 'flow', 'change' and cut across each other regardless of the national boundaries.
- c. People can belong to a variety of cultures both within and between societies.
- d. And therefore, people are influenced or make use of a variety of cultural elements.

### **'Small culture'/ 'large culture' approaches**

In an earlier argument, and in terms of research, Holliday (1999) talks of the two views cited above under the headings of 'small culture' and 'large culture' paradigms arguing that the former comprises all the characteristics of the anti-essentialist view while the latter has all the features of the essentialist view. He points out that the 'small cultures' approach can be used as a device for interpreting and understanding any emergent behaviour, 'rather than seeking to explain prescribed ethnic, national or international differences' as it is the case with the 'large culture' approach (Holliday, 1999. p.240). In his argument for the 'small cultures' approach, Holliday concentrates mainly on the idea that small cultures, which apply to any social grouping of any size or activities wherever there is cohesive behaviour, are not subsumed by parent large cultures: 'small cultures run *between* as well as *within* related large cultures' (Holliday, 1999. p.289. *His emphasis*).

According to Holliday's argument, a national culture, even if it can be identified by a number of features, becomes so complex and can no longer be viewed as one homogeneous entity, but rather as one incorporating urban, rural, regional, religious, gender, family, social class and a variety of other activities or small cultures. On this basis, Holliday (1999) critiques applied linguistics, foreign language education and management studies for taking large/ethnic culture as the basic unit, arguing that a large culture approach would lead to overgeneralizations and reductionist stereotypes as we have seen in previous discussion. In management studies, for example, Hofstede (1990) categorizes whole countries according to social-psychological dimensions: 'individualism/collectivism'; 'high/low power distance' (to distinguish between hierarchical and egalitarian societies); and 'high/low uncertainty avoidance' (to distinguish societies which try to avoid ambiguity as much as possible from the more tolerant to ambiguity). Hofstede uses these dimensions to analyze work and teaching/learning patterns in different societies. However, as Palfreyman (2003 a) puts it, 'generalizations about national/ethnic groups, although useful as heuristics, are insufficient' since they do not reflect the actual complexity of national/ethnic culture.

Holliday's analysis of educational settings (1994) shows us how 'small cultures' work. Classroom, teachers and host institutions cultures- small cultures indeed- provide us with clear examples of how small cultures may extend beyond the boundaries on national culture. Most classrooms all over the world are similar to each other in terms of the seating arrangements and teachers and students' behaviour despite the differences between national cultures. A Syrian teacher and a Chinese one may share some/most of the elements of professional culture of language teaching although they belong to different nationalities. Yet even these small educational cultures are not completely subsumed by each other. Rather, they cross each other while at the same time they are open to influences from outside cultures, such as the international education cultures. In this regard, Holliday argues that

Both the classroom and host institution cultures will be part of a large educational system which will also have a culture which will itself be complex. Teachers bring tradition to the classroom, derived from professional-academic cultures. Professional-academic cultures derive influence from both within and outside the host institution, as well as partly from international education-related cultures.... Students too, bring tradition to the classroom, passed from generation to generation of students, and formed partly in the corridors of the host institution, partly through reference groups which may extend to other institutions, through the media and the family (Holliday, 1994. pp. 30-31)

### **Small cultures and discourse:**

The small cultures approach constitutes a point of departure from the hegemony of culture long adhered to by ELT and applied linguistics researchers. This approach allows difference within the same culture to be uncovered. Considering an educational setting, for example, in terms of small cultures allows us to see a difference between the perspectives of different parties receiving the culture of learning endorsed by this setting as part of the educational system as a whole. It allows us too to see any difference, if there is any, between this setting and other settings, such as other departments, colleges, or even universities within the same educational system. However, these parties are not passive recipients of culture. Rather, they actively engage in a process of interpreting and negotiating the received cultural meanings jointly with other people influenced in this by their prior experiences, backgrounds and interaction with others. This process leads to the construction of new meanings that either reaffirm the received meaning or challenge it. This implies that the process of cultural construction at a small scale in particular setting works with cultural resources that are available in the wider social context, resources that are made prevalent by particular circumstances such as the political and economic conditions of the wider society. Therefore, it is very important, when studying a culture of learning and/or one aspect of it such as learner autonomy, for example, to have a look at what is meant, for example, by learning/teaching, learner/teacher's responsibility and learner autonomy in the wider context and to investigate into the conditions that make these conceptualizations authoritative. The steps mentioned above, that is, interpretation, negotiation, and construction or reconstruction of cultural meanings are similar to the processes of reproducing culture which Du Gay (1997) terms as the 'circuit of culture'.

Differences in interpretation will result in different ways of thinking and talking about learning and teaching. These different ways constitute different discourses. A discourse about learning and teaching can be defined as 'a way of interpreting and describing learning or teaching which has some consistency across contexts' (Palfreyman, 2003 b. p.185 citing Salaman, 1997). This implies that different discourses represent learning and teaching in particular ways as to make these processes manageable. Therefore, a study tackling learner autonomy, for example, in a particular setting should attend to the participants' representations of learning/teaching and learner autonomy, since these constitute the basis for action and interpretation. Adapting Hall's (1997. Cited in Palfreyman, 2003b) framework for analyzing discourse, Palfreyman (2003 b) argues that according to this framework a discourse about learning or learner autonomy would involve:

- a. 'Assumptions' that allow for certain ways of thinking or talking or problematize others. For example, discourses about learner autonomy in language education problematize teacher-dependence.
- b. 'Roles', 'identities' or 'subject positions' for both learners and teachers.

c. 'Practices' or 'technologies' such as learner training, peer evaluation and self-evaluation activities.

d. 'Authorities' and 'other discourses' which constitute sources of legitimacy for the discourse.

Two points are worth mentioning here. First, the above argument does not suggest in any way that individuals are totally with or against a particular discourse. Interpretations actually vary not only between groups or individuals but also from context to another. Ribbins *et al* (1988) notes how teachers use a discourse of 'pupil-centeredness' when they are in a public meeting and a discourse of 'discipline' and control when they are in the staff room. Second, as we have seen in the discussion of 'culturism' 'otherization' runs not only between societies but also within the same society. Therefore, we should expect that students could be otherized as teachers use certain discourses to support certain interests in the classroom such as the assertion of certain agendas or the preservation of status.

#### **The Place of the individual: the concept of 'agency'**

As we have mentioned before, with the views current in ELT and applied linguistics culture is often seen as determining the behaviour of people systematically in different situations. This implies that no freedom is left to individuals, who are turned into 'cultural dopes' or automata, and the concept of 'agency', if not left out of consideration, is felt to be at odds with cultural background. Culture, as having a deterministic value, is very clear, for example, in Flowerdew and Miller's discussion of the Confucian teachings and their effect on the Hong Kong students' academic behaviour. This notion is highlighted by Palfreyman's (2001) critique of 'the predictive cultural overview' which sees culture as having a predictive value, and by Kubota's critique of the discursive construction of EFL/ESL students as Others and which promotes 'a deterministic thinking that regards students as rigidly bound by cultural traditions' (Kubota, 1999, p.14). However, if according to Geertz (1973), culture is a framework of interpretation then individuals are actively engaged as agents in a process of making sense of their life. Recent social anthropological accounts of culture have tackled and explored more the question of agency and the role played by social actors in the expression of their culture(s). Researchers in this regard talk about 'the process of re-appropriation of culture to new ends' (Rubinstein, 2001, p.77). Sewell (1992, Cited in Rubinstein, 2001) describes this process as the actor's ability to 'transpose' schemas (rules): 'to say that schemas are transposable... is to say that they can be applied to a wide and not fully predictable range of cases outside the context in which they are initially learned'. Similarly, and even more interestingly, Swidler (1986) describes culture as a 'tool kit of resources', that is, a diverse set of elements which individuals use to various ends or from which they choose in the process of interpreting their actions as well as others'. Swidler describes social actors as 'active, sometimes skilled users of culture' and like Sewell she emphasizes the ways in which 'established cultural resources are re-appropriated in new contexts' (p. 282). 'Agency' is particularly important to the study of concepts such as learner autonomy. There is, for example, a trend in the literature, namely the socio-cultural perspective of learner autonomy, which shows that the individual agency and cultural background can work together as individuals use or reject the opportunities offered by their learning context to negotiate their identities via the community to which they belong or to create a new context in which to practice their autonomy.

### Summary and implications

This summary is undertaken with a view for getting some implications to be carried on board by researchers who are interested in the study of culture of learning a foreign language in a particular setting, the study of any aspect of the teaching/learning process or the adaptation of a given methodology.

- An ethnographic study of the culture of learning can be done only by building up 'thick description'. In this sense, two main things have to be done: observing people's behaviour across a range of practices and events, and asking them about their perspectives and interpretations.

- The arguments in ELT and applied linguistics literature about the relation between culture and learning are often characterized by understanding culture only in terms of large national/ethnic culture and by considering culture as static, homogeneous, and deterministic, that is, a straightforward cause of people's behaviour.

- As the argument goes on, this paradigm has two serious implications: first, it emphasizes the influence of national culture at the expense of a variety of other influences and therefore offers a simplified, uni-dimensional and often misleading picture of the society under study; second, it becomes implicated in a process of discursive construction that seeks otherizing EFL/ESL students along with their cultures and showing them in negative terms.

- This discursive construction that results in the reduction of students from other backgrounds to a set of culturally negative stereotypes is a characteristic of the essentialist paradigm and could be found between different societies and within the same society (culturism).

- The alternative paradigm is anti-essentialism and the associated 'small cultures' approach which seeks the interpretation of social life rather than predicting it, and thus gives a multi-dimensional picture and avoids stereotypes.

- The argument in the second and third points above could be interpreted as ignoring the influence of national culture, which is not the case. The influence of national culture is always there and could be overriding in particular instances. However, this depends on the interplay of many factors such as urban, rural, regional, religious, family, class, gender, or political orientation factors and the 'small cultures' associated with them. These small cultures cut across each other and influence each other.

- Culture is not a rigid, isolated entity. Rather, it is open to influences from other cultures. Accordingly, the Syrian culture could be viewed as having a set of common characteristics which underpin its collective identity and define it with other countries as the culture of Arab Eastern countries, which is a subculture of the larger Arab culture. It could also be defined with other countries as the Mediterranean culture.

- The mutual influences within and between cultures implies that a change is inevitable. Culture is not static, but dynamic, fluid and ever-changing. This change could be brought about by political and economic changes within the society. These aspects should be taken into consideration when describing a culture. In other words, culture should be described in a particular historical moment.

- A culture of learning could be viewed in the same light. It is open to negotiation, and interpretation by different groups of people. These interpretations are influenced by the same factors mentioned in the sixth point.

- Individuals are not passive recipients of cultural forms, but rather active negotiators, interpreters, and constructors of meanings influenced in this by their background experiences and interactions with others.

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