



HANDLING CULTURE IN THE ENGLISH CLASSROOM: Easter holiday

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Abstract

One of the reasons why people learn English nowadays is to understand the culture of a particular English-speaking country and it has been known that we cannot read, write, listen or speak a language without the knowledge of its culture. Exposing students to cultural knowledge gives them more insights of real language, which also keeps them more motivated to learn the target language. This motivation comes, especially, through the fact that most of the times when dealing with culture, learners are exposed to authentic material and also in touch with the diversity and plurality of the native language speakers. Thus the aim of this paper is to develop bigger awareness of how to deal with this cultural knowledge by comparing and contextualizing Easter in the USA and Brazil through a sample activity. To do so, we did some bibliographical research based mainly on Harmer (1998), Brewster (2017), Johnson; Rinvoluceri (2010) and Cleary (2008) who gave us all the support to talk about the theme. Thus, we expect this research contributes to the studies of the English language teaching practice, as well as collaborates with the implementation of culture studies into the foreign language teaching-process.

Key words: English teaching. English. Culture. Easter.

Submission: 10/26/2021. **Approval:** 05/11/2021

1 Introduction

English has been assuming a fundamental role in the lives of practically everyone, thus its study has become essential, not only to understand what surrounds people every day, but also to get a better job opportunity or to understand the culture of a particular English-speaking country. Independently of the reason way a person is learning a foreign language, it has been known that we cannot read, write, listen or speak a language without the knowledge of its culture. Therefore, we got interested in developing bigger awareness of how to deal with this cultural

knowledge by comparing and contextualizing Easter in the USA and Brazil through a sample activity, which is the objective of this paper.

To reach the aim we did some bibliographical research based mainly on Harmer (1994, 1998), Brewster (2017), Johnson; Rinvolucrí (2010) and Cleary (2008) who gave us all the support to explore the topic.

In the first part of this research, we talk about the reasons why people want to learn English, which goes from the fact that it is part of the school curriculum to their needs to be inserted in an English-speaking country culture. Then, we mention elements that should be considered to offer better lessons. After that, we discuss some concepts of culture and its importance in the English teaching-learning process. Finally, we suggest an activity that deals with the cultural aspects of Easter in the United States arousing its similarities and differences with the same Brazilian holiday.

2 Grounds for learning English

Spoken in various parts of the world and present in all or almost all daily lives, English has established itself as the most spoken language in the world. Learning it has become essential for several reasons: positioning yourself in a more valued way within the competitive job market, evolving in your professional career, being an exchange student in a foreign-speaking country, reading news from other countries, reading books in English, among other activities that permeate our daily lives.

Harmer (1994) states that many foreign language students learn English due to reasons such as: school curriculum, the target language community, for specific purposes, culture and others. Most of the learners start studying the language because it is part of the school curriculum. To have a better professional chance, students should dive into a new language. Another reason to learn a foreign language is to have a chance of a better job in the future:

Some people want to study English (or another foreign language) because they think it offers a chance for advancement in their professional lives. They will get a better job with two languages than if they only know their mother tongue. English has a special position here since it has become the international language of communication (HARMER, 1994, p. 2).

Sometimes students live in a place where English is the spoken language, therefore, English will be necessary to survive in the target language community. Learners also learn English for specific purposes such as for their jobs: a waiter, a business executive or an international trader (HARMER, 1994).

Furthermore, some people learn English in order to be inserted in that English-speaking country's culture. "[...] they are attracted to the culture of the TLCs (Target Language Communities) [...]. They learn the language because they want to know more about the people who speak it, [...]" (HARMER, 1994, p. 2).

As a result, we could see that English is the *língua franca*,: "a language used for communication between groups of people who speak different languages" (CAMBRIDGE DICTIONARY, 2021, online).

Independently of the reason why a student is learning the language, they have to be motivated to do so, as motivation is the key element in the teaching-

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learning process. According to Harmer (1998), in normal situations, children acquire language unconsciously if they are given social input every day and most adults, having the adequate type of interaction with the language, can learn it without taking a course, and they can still speak fluently, even if they have problems with pronunciation and grammar.

Thus, to make students more interested in learning a language and also in a way that is closer as possible to their way they learned their mother tongue, Harmer (1998) suggests three elements that should be present in every lesson: ESA – engage, study and activate. These elements will motivate students, enable them to study and practice the language.

When starting a class, Harmer (1998) says that teachers should always *Engage* their students, by, for example, reminding them of the last content or eliciting information related to the next topic. Teachers can apply tasks and materials such as excerpts of literary texts, parts of films, music or games. This is the time when the educator “try to arouse the students’ interest, thus involving their emotions” (HARMER, 1998, p. 25).

The *Study* element deals with the emphasis of the lesson on what has to be taught. Students can focus, in this part of the class, for example, in some vocabulary issues or grammar. It doesn’t matter how the teacher is going to do it, the important part, according to Harmer (1998), is that the language needs to be worked, constructed.

Finally, the *Activate* element, allows learners to practice their language. It is related to the output-oriented tasks, such as activities involving speaking and writing. It is also important to mention that

Activate exercises offer students a chance to try out real language use with little or no restriction – a kind of rehearsal for the real world [...] If students do not have a chance to *Activate* their knowledge in the safety of a classroom, they may find transferring language acquisition and study into language use in the real world far more problematical (HARMER, 1998, p. 26).

However, educators don’t need to follow this ESA order very strictly, they can vary the steps. For example, instead of engaging, studying and practicing, they can engage, practice and study, in order not to do the same process every class, taking in consideration it can bore the students.

2.1 How to increase the quality of our classes and motivate learners

As foreign language teachers we are presented with several challenges daily, however the one that we need to be most careful about is making sure that our students are comprehending and are interested in the subject. Therefore, Brewster (2017) mentions not only elements to be considered in our teaching practice but also several ways to maximize our teaching.

There are four elements that we should always consider according to Brewster (2017): motivation for learning the language; exposure to the target language; opportunities to use the language and effective instructions.

We can say that they are, somehow, connected to the ESA elements, that we have just mentioned, except for the giving of instructions which is mainly

connected to the learning process itself. Giving instructions effectively shortens the process.

According to Brewster (2017), it is extremely necessary for the proper learning of the student that they get motivated to learn a foreign language, if the student is only learning because it is in their school curriculum, as it has already been mentioned, or because their parents or teachers said, so their progress might decrease. We, as educators, might try to use different tools, like games, song activities, TV series excerpt or movies to grab their attention and interest and diversify the lesson.

Brewster (2017) says that among a diversity of ways used to improve the teaching-learning process a good way to ensure students are comprehending questions, which is a vital part of learning a language, is to give more waiting time in between questions, so that learners have more time to think and process what was asked. “[...] by waiting a few seconds you are ensuring more people are involved in trying to answer the question” (BREWSTER, 2017, p. 34).

Something of great value, the author brings us is the concept of ‘magical moments’ in the classrooms, which is totally connected with the moment cultural aspect arise:

Once I was watching a primary class where the teacher was doing a lesson about Christmas celebrations. It was a perfectly good class but in one moment a little girl raised her hand and said, ‘In my family, we celebrate Hanukkah!’ A magic moment had arrived!! The teacher said, ‘Oh that’s nice’ and went on with the lesson. She could have used that moment to get the children to ask the girl questions about Hanukkah and look at a Jewish celebration which would widen their culture. Alas the magic moment was lost (BREWSTER, 2017, p. 34).

Even though it is important to have a sound plan for your lessons it is important to seize moments like this to greatly expand the students’ communication skills, vocabulary and even their cultural knowledge. In conclusion, there are several ways to improve the way we teach to make sure the students are achieving their full potential and for that we must try to understand them and know their strengths and weaknesses.

3 Culture in the English classroom

Culture is everywhere, we practically cannot write, read, listen or say something that is totally disconnected from culture, and we may provide it several meanings, such as to propagate or cultivate something, or an element that changes with the society over time, modifying people’s habits (JOHNSON; RINVOLUCRI, 2010). Consequently, teachers should keep in mind that culture is an integrative part of language teaching and they must know how to deal with this theme in the classroom.

Nowadays, the teaching-learning process has included culture and civilization aspects in its material, which make students of a target language be aware of, not only cultural aspects but also of current events happening in that culture.

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All this is praiseworthy, although it could be argued that what we learn about beliefs and behaviours from all this may be rather limited. More and more modern language materials are 'authentic' that is, taken verbatim from radio, TV and newspapers. This gives us more of an insight into national character via real language. However, again, this is limited. It depends what kind of authentic material, or how much of it, we expose our students to, as well how we decide to use it [...] (JOHNSON; RINVOLUCRI, 2010, p. 15).

Therefore the study of another language is also the study of the culture of this language. Students should be aware of the similarities and differences between their mother tongue and the target language they are learning, which will provide them with new words and maybe make them feel more comfortable to talk about them.

A long time ago, arts – such as literature – were highly focused when talking about culture in English learning, however, nowadays, according to Cleary (2008), the main topic inside culture are elements such as the social and the behaviors of the public, leading students to understand that everyone has its morals and values, the cultural awareness, as something that leads to a relevant communication.

Considering that culture takes an important role in language teaching, teachers may ask what culture we should teach them. Taking a look at English literature, for example, we can observe that

English, as Ronald Carter and David Nunan state in the *Cambridge Guide to Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages*, "no longer belongs to the United Kingdom, nor to the United States. It is an increasingly diverse and diversified resource for global communication (CLEARY, 2008, p. 32).

Furthermore, concerning the use of culture, teachers should be aware of the fact that their lessons ought not to contain only traditional aspects of it, in other words only the content provided by coursebooks or from the internet. It must cover:

[...] two major areas of thinking. The first area for consideration is that of the humanities, where 'it focuses on the way a social group represents itself and others through its material productions, be they works of art literature, social institutions or artifacts of everyday life' [...] The second area is that of [...] attitudes and beliefs, ways of thinking, behaving and remembering shared by members of that community' [...] to the hidden patterns, the hidden rules of belief and behavior that govern everyday living' [...] (JOHNSON; RINVOLUCRI, p. 7, 2010).

Trevisan; Fortes (2021, online) corroborates this idea when she says:

[...] "aprender uma língua é sempre, um pouco, tornar-se um outro". Esse "outro" é o exterior e, ao mesmo tempo, o interior, que me constitui, pois só existo a partir do olhar do outro (família, amigos, colegas de trabalho e de escola etc.). Nesse sentido, o contato com outras línguas pode ampliar o repertório de modos de ver e de compreender o mundo, deslocando o olhar, trazendo uma aproximação do sujeito ao diferente e, ao mesmo tempo, uma nova perspectiva sobre sua própria cultura, que já não lhe é tão

GOMES, A.P.T.; BATISTA, G.H.M.; CINTRA, L. B.; VENÂNCIO, M. H. transparente. Uma vez que aprende que sua perspectiva do mundo não é a única, compreende e se apropria de outros conceitos e visões.¹

Although cultural awareness is a complex topic within the teaching-learning process, it is of central importance.

4 Celebrating Easter in the USA: cultural similarities and differences

Learning a foreign language also means learning its culture. Therefore, the teaching-learning process must foster language skills of the target language and cultural knowledge of it. Thus, our aim is to develop bigger awareness of how to deal with this cultural knowledge by comparing and contextualizing Easter in the USA and Brazil through a sample activity.

To accomplish it, we developed an activity called *Easter Parade in the USA* (see Appendix A) for the 7th – 9th grade of elementary school (*Ensino Fundamental II*). To start the lesson, in order to motivate students, which is a key element in teaching-learning process as Harmer (1998) says, we showed some pictures to introduce the topic and asked students to talk about them. By doing so, we were also engaging the learners into the topic, since according to Harmer (1998) and Brexter (2017) this is a way of making learners interested in what comes next.

Besides the engage element, Harmer (1998) also mentions two other ones that should be present in every lesson: study and activate. The study element handled through this activity was vocabulary related to Easter through the reading passages and the activate element was dealt with during the final discussion when students were given the opportunity to try out real language they had been exposed to before.

Through this activity, learners could develop culture awareness that led to relevant communication as the reading passages and the video provided them with information of behavior of the public, which is an idea considered by Cleary (2008). Besides it, the video brought an opportunity for showing students the diversity and plurality of the native speakers in the same way Cleary (2008) points out.

Not only the video but also the reading passages provided students with the chance for getting in touch with authentic material, which according to Johnson; Rinvoluceri (2010), gives learners an insight into national character via real language. In addition to the fact that our lessons should not contain only traditional aspects of it, such as the definitions, usually taken from coursebooks or from the internet, as Johnson; Rinvoluceri (2010) states, this is not a completely bad thing, but it may be limited if the material just focus on superficial aspects of it.

Brewster (2017) advocates that to ensure learners are comprehending what they are learning, they need some waiting time between questions and answers. During the activity, students had a time limit to do the reading passage exercises and also some time to think about the questions asked in the final discussion, which improved their communication and also allowed them to make any comments related to the theme, again, as Brewster (2017) mentions, they were taking advantage of this magical moment.

¹ The quotations will be kept in the original language in order not to lose its authenticity.

The relevance of culture in the learning process begins with the fact that many people say that it is linked to the teaching of a language, as everything we say, write or listen to is connected to our culture as Johnson; Rinvoluceri (2010) emphasizes. Consequently, with culture, teachers are able to broaden their students' capacity of reading and understanding almost everything that is presented to them as it is everywhere within the teaching of the language.

5 Conclusion

Taking into account that culture has a great significance in the teaching-learning process and aiming at developing increasing awareness of how to deal with it, by comparing and contextualizing Easter in the USA and Brazil through a sample activity we can say that, undoubtedly, culture is an inner part of the teaching-learning process.

The bibliographical research indicated that culture is not an issue to be taught by going through the basic aspects of a country that most of the times are introduced by coursebooks, teachers should go beyond it. The cultural content should illustrate context and situations from English speaking countries reflecting the diversity and plurality of the speakers.

The sample activity revealed that when we compare and contextualize cultural elements in the teaching process the lessons are not only more motivating, but it also gives students a clear perception of real language usage. Therefore, we can say that cultural knowledge is an integrative part of the foreign language teaching-learning process.

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Appendix A
Easter Parade in the USA: a sample activity

1 – CLASS PROFILE

7th – 9th grade Ensino Fundamental II.

2 – AIM

To talk about the Easter Parades in the USA dealing with the reading skill.

3 – SUBSIDIARY AIMS

Compare and contextualize Easter in the USA and Brazil.

4 – LANGUAGE SYSTEMS

Lexis - Ss will learn Easter vocabulary related to the Easter parade through a reading passage.

5 – ASSUMPTIONS

The teacher is assuming that students know how the holiday/religious festival is celebrated in Brazil. This knowledge can be used as a brainstorming/warm up activity to the tasks that will follow and make the comparison easier.

6 – STEPS

Write down the steps of your lesson.

1. The teacher starts the Easter Parade class by showing these four photos related to the event:

Picture 1 - Bonnets



Source: Avery, 2021, online

Picture 2 – Easter bonnet parade



Source: Weaver, 2021, online

Picture 3 – Easter parade and Easter bonnet festival



Source: ROVE.ME

Picture 4 – Easter parade



Source: Amtrak, 2021, online

2. The teacher asks students to describe what they can see in the images and explains that the photos are from an event that takes place in the United State called Easter Parade.
3. The teacher asks students to read the first text about Easter parade in New York and gives instructions to the two exercises (a matching exercise and a true or false one)

Easter Parade in New York

Every [Easter Sunday](#), the streets of Manhattan come alive with spring colors and flowery **bonnets** as part of the annual **Easter Parade** and Bonnet Festival.

Unlike most [New York City parades](#), the Easter procession isn't an organized event. People will tend to get in and out of shops and cafes along the route. Viewers may stop by the festivities at any time during its six-hour duration to see the various Easter bonnets and costumed pets.

People from around the world come to New York City to participate, and their **outfits** for the day's festivities range from elegant to extravagant. Almost all of them, however, are homemade. It's a great spectacle: there will be dogs in full costume, humans in Civil War period costumes, even people in the **haute couture**.

Source: adapted from <https://www.tripsavvy.com/nyc-easter-parade-and-bonnet-festival-1612204>.

Match the words from column A with the correct definitions from column B. Check the text for the context.

A	B
1. EASTER (c)	a) A type of hat that covers the ears
2. PARADE (e)	b) Clothes for a particular occasion
3. BONNET (a)	c) A Christian religious holiday to celebrate Jesus Christ's return to life after he was killed
4. OUTFITS (b)	d) Expensive clothes of original design and high quality
5. HAUTE COUTURE (d)	e) A large number of people who are walking in the same direction

Read the text and mark the sentences true (T) or false (F):

- (F) The Easter Parade takes place every Easter **Tuesday**. (= Sunday)
- (T) People usually get in and out of shops along the route.
- (T) The Easter Parade event lasts for six hours.

- (F) The Easter Parade in New York **is** an organized event. (= isn't)
(T) The participants' outfits can range from elegant to extravagant.

4. The teacher asks students to read a second text, which is about the history of the Easter Parade and explains the exercise that follows it.

History of the Easter Parade

The tradition of dressing up for the event started back in the 1880s, when women would wear their finest hats and dresses and decorate the churches with flowers to celebrate the **holy** day.

From the 1880s through the 1950s, the New York City Easter Parade was one of the largest cultural expressions in America to celebrate the holiday. However, as the years went on, the Easter festival became less about religion and more about extravagance and American prosperity.

Today, the Easter Parade combines these traditions by incorporating the annual Bonnet Festival into the parade and by hosting events at St. Patrick's Cathedral in observance of Easter.

Source: adapted from <https://www.tripsavvy.com/nyc-easter-parade-and-bonnet-festival-1612204>.

GLOSSARY:

HOLY – related to a religion or a god.

Read the sentences below and choose the sentence with the same idea of the text (there is more than one correct alternative):

- a)** Women used to wear their hand-picked hats and dresses to commemorate the holy day.
- b) Women used to adorn their rooms with flowers on their birthday, because it was the period's trend.
- c)** The practise of putting on special clothes for the event started back in the 1880s.
- d) New York City Easter Parade wasn't one of the biggest cultural expressions in America, because it became less focused in religion at that period.
- e) Over time, the Easter festival became more about religion.

5. The teacher asks students to read the third and last passage, in which there are three texts (A-C) and explains the exercise about it.

Best Easter Parades Across the US

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Although the New York version always receives the greatest fame among the best Easter Parades in the USA, many others deserve attention.

A- Easter On Parade, Richmond

Attracting more than 25,000 people annually, the Easter on Parade event in Richmond - one of the oldest Easter parades in the U. S. - presents many participants who will parade through the four blocks of the famous Monument Avenue. Most of the parade participants and many of their family's pets will be dressed in festive Easter-themed costumes. The event will also present a lot of activities and attractions for the whole family, such as local arts, good food, live music, and various children's activities, including a zoo and balloon art.

B- Philadelphia Easter Promenade

The annual Easter **Promenade** takes place along the city's famous South Street, allowing anyone to participate in the day's festivities. Everyone is encouraged to wear rabbit ear **headbands** and their best Easter outfits, as celebrity judges will also select the best dressed in several categories, including Best-Dressed Little Boy and Girl, Best-Dressed Woman, Best Easter Bonnet, among others.

C- Easter parade in San Francisco

For the past 24 years, the event has hosted a small but lively Easter Parade along the city's vibrant Union Street. Known as the "Biggest Little Parade in San Francisco", the informal Easter Parade will present classic and **vintage convertibles**, local **marching bands** and dance troupes, a motorized San Francisco **cable car**, and participants dressed in Easter-themed costumes, including people wearing Easter hats and simple bunny ears, and rabbit costumes.

Source: adapted from <https://newyork.cbslocal.com/2018/03/21/best-easter-parades-across-the-us/>.

GLOSSARY:

PROMENADE – a path for walking on;

HEADBAND – a material worn around the head;

VINTAGE – produced in the past;

CONVERTIBLE – a car with a soft roof that can be folded back;

MARCHING BAND – a group of musicians who march at the same time as playing their instruments;

CABLE CAR – a vehicle on a cable railway.

In which text we can find the information below:

- 1- People wear a rabbit (or bunny) ears - (**B,C**);
- 2- "Biggest Little Parade [...]" - (**C**);
- 3- Zoo - (**A**);
- 4- Easter-themed costumes - (**A,B,C**);
- 5- Judges - (**B**);

6- Annualy – (**A,B,C**);

6. The teacher holds a conversation to talk about the fact that there is not the Easter Parade in Brazil and the way we celebrate it here.
7. The teacher shows the following video, called “Easter Bonnet Parade Takes Over Midtown”, showing the Easter Parade in New York to illustrate the event and to connect it to the final discussion mentioned in the next step.

CBS New York: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rbAQxdY-t6Y&t=18s>

8. As a final discussion, teacher asks the students the following questions orally: “Would you like to participate in the Easter Parade?”, “How would you decorate your Easter bonnet?” and “Would you like to costume your pet to participate in the parade? Which costume would your pet wear?”.