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TEACHING CULTURE IN THE MODERN ESP CLASSROOM

Nataša Bakić-Mirić¹, Sophia Butt², Branislava Dilparić¹, Madina Ashirimbetova³

¹University of Priština – Kosovska Mitrovica, Serbia

²University of Birmingham, UK; Trinity College London, UK

³Suleyman Demirel University, Almaty, Kazakhstan

Abstract. *For several decades now, it has been realised that teaching a foreign language means much more than just focusing on the four basic language skills (reading, writing, listening and speaking); it also encompasses teaching about culture. Teaching culture in the modern English for Specific Purposes (ESP) classroom is focused on building students' knowledge of cultures while simultaneously developing their language skills. Although this approach to ESP is not new, this paper will analyze the basic principles of teaching culture and possible challenges in the process. In addition to this, it will show authentic classroom examples, present practical ideas for instructors and show what benefits teaching culture bring in the modern ESP classroom.*

Key words: *culture, ESP classroom, cultural competence, students, teachers*

1. INTRODUCTION

Generally, the issue of introducing culture into the modern ESP classroom has been a running issue in higher education for a long time. Unfortunately, even with the substantial research of contemporary scholars [Liddicoat, Byram, Kramersch, Crozet and Scarvino], language instructors have still not come to terms with how to incorporate culture in the context of ESP lessons. This alone puts forward arguments for treating culture as the fifth language skill apart from the standard four skills that have been around for decades (Tomalin 2010). That is why authors like Crozet (1996), Kramersch (1999), Byram (2002) Liddicoat (2013) advocate for a completely new method of teaching that would involve both language and culture because it preconditions language and culture as closely intertwined.

In 2020, Byram, who is a strong advocate of the cultural approach to language teaching, postulated that teaching culture shapes students as intercultural citizens who do not allow different cultural barriers to influence the communication process. Similarly, Liddicoat and Scarvino (2013) have argued that the cultural approach to second language teaching would help students to not only acquire linguistic competence, but also develop their cultural competence, which is indispensable for all professions be it in health care, business, engineering or education.

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Corresponding author: Nataša Bakić-Mirić, University of Priština – Kosovska Mitrovica, Serbia

E-mail: natasa.bakic.miric@yahoo.com

According to Crozet (1996), the ultimate goal of teaching and learning a language should not only be to enable students to communicate in a different language, but also in a different cultural space. Liddicoat and Scarvino (2013) agree with this by saying that every message, which is conveyed through language, is transmitted in a certain cultural context, which is different across cultures, and, which can cause misunderstandings in communication. Byram (2020) best explains this by saying that when someone speaks another language, they do not abandon their worldviews, norms, and values nor do they assimilate the worldviews, norms and values of their interlocutors. Instead, they typically try to find a parallel between their culture and a new culture. This reinforces the work of Crozet, Liddicoat and Bianco (1999) who said that a deeper understanding of one's own culture and the differences that exist in other cultures can be considered the most important goal and outcome of second language learning.

Cultural literacy is a necessity, as postulated by Bada (2000). He argued that this is so due to the fact that most language learners who are not exposed to the culture of the society in question seem to encounter significant hardship in communicating intended meaning to native speakers. This strongly supported Kramsch's (1993) opinion that it is of paramount importance that cultures, and not randomly chosen cultural aspects, are dealt with during foreign language lessons.

Perhaps the aforementioned is best delineated in Byram (1997) who said that teaching a foreign language from a cultural perspective is important because it gives learners both intercultural and linguistic competence; prepares them for interactions with people from other cultures; enables them to better understand and accept people from other cultures as individuals with distinctive perspectives, values and behaviors; and helps them see that such interaction is an enriching experience.

The teaching of ESP can involve slightly different goals and indeed a range of challenges when taught at different levels, and/or when involving separate disciplines. This is one of the ways to make ESP classes exciting educational experiences. This article looks at teaching culture, and explores possible avenues of thinking and challenges in teaching and learning about culture in English for Specific Purposes.

2. HOW SHOULD CULTURE BE EMBEDDED INTO ESP LESSONS?

More and more language teachers are becoming well aware of the need to teach culture as part of language acquisition, yet there is still a lack of consensus on how to introduce this concept into lessons. In addition to this, many teachers believe that they must have a formal training in teaching culture to be able to teach it and, on top of that, there is still no official guidebook or an actual textbook that they can use to teach culture (Frank, 2013).

One of the possible reasons for a lack of consensus could be because culture itself embodies a broad range of sub-categories, for instance: traditions and customs; foods; dress; history; architecture; art; and moral codes. Furthermore, when teaching a language such as English, which has many varieties (e.g.: British English; American English; Australian English; Indian English; Nigerian English, etc.), which variety should be focused on? Hence, the extent to which an ESP teacher could sufficiently cover the necessary aspects of culture that would equip a language learner with an understanding of the English without it becoming either a lesson in anthropology or a lesson in the history of the language could be deemed one of the main challenges for the instructor.

What follows is one of the approaches to teaching culture in the ESP classroom, which consists of four stages¹:

1. Teaching source culture
2. Teaching elements of culture
3. Teaching different types of cultures (culture-specific learning)
4. Teaching intercultural communication (culture-general learning)

According to Byram (1997) by introducing these stages in teaching culture, instructors can help students to connect to the target culture, raise their awareness of cultural differences, and improve their intercultural communicative competence.

1. Teaching source culture: There are many definitions of culture, and teachers need to define culture in simple terms before students can actually engage in interactive discussions about the concept. The simplest definition of culture is that culture is patterns of learned and shared behavior that are cumulative and transmitted across generations (Hofstede 2013). Generally speaking, when people think of culture, they often think of visible aspects of culture such as food, clothing, music, art, or literature. Others may associate culture with beliefs, mores, values, worldviews and attitudes, or non-visible aspects of culture. Here, it is important for students to understand that their own culture affects how they think, interact and communicate while the ability to ask and answer questions based on their own culture facilitates the process of making connections across cultures. ESP teachers can help students activate their cultural knowledge by making them aware of important elements of their own culture (both visible and nonvisible aspects) to help them understand how their culture has shaped them (Byram, 1997). To achieve this, teachers can guide students to think about different cultures by asking them to answer the following questions (Martin and Nakayama, 2018):

- What values did your parents or guardians attempt to instill in you? Why were these values considered important?
- What factors in your experience have led to the development of positive feelings about your own cultural heritage and background? What factors have led to negative feelings, if any?
- What behaviors reflect our culture, and how are they learned and shared?
- What important factors (social, religious, and economic) influence our culture?
- What are some important mores that are unique to our country?
- What worldviews, beliefs and values are mostly valued in our culture and why?
- When can contact between members of two cultures improve their attitudes towards each other and facilitate communication between them?
- Why is it said that much of culture is invisible?

As noted before, discussions based on these considerations can foster an atmosphere that encourages students to think about their own culture and make connections across cultures while studying English for Specific Purposes.

2. Teaching elements of culture: The basic elements of culture refer to language, norms, beliefs, symbols, values and history. These elements are not as easily recognized because they tend to be ingrained in society and they belong to non-visible aspects of culture which are often difficult to identify, as they tend to be value-based and deeply

¹ This classroom model is similar to the one proposed by Michael Paige *apud* Cohen *et al* (2003).

rooted in a culture (Frank, 2013). A tool that can help ESP students conceptualize elements that make up a culture is most famously described by Edward T. Hall's (1976) "cultural iceberg" analogy. The iceberg below provides a useful analogy and highlights the importance of the mentioned nonvisible aspects of culture (Figure 1).

The small 'tip of the iceberg' (about 10%) that can be seen above the water level represents visible aspects of culture. The 90% of the iceberg that remains unseen below the surface represents the nonvisible aspects of culture. Understanding these nonvisible aspects of culture is critical for bridging cultural differences and for establishing productive and harmonious relationships with other cultural groups (Hall *apud*. Bakić-Mirić, 2022). On the other hand, focusing on the visible aspects of culture alone is insufficient for overcoming the misunderstandings, misconceptions and conflicts that characterize intercultural encounters (Martin and Nakayama, 2018), because, in most cases, the nonvisible aspects of culture influence the visible ones. For instance, religious beliefs are exemplified in certain customs while notions of modesty influence attire and behavior. In this way, visible behaviors are influenced by beliefs, values and assumptions, which are invisible, subconscious and often overlooked, and can create problems in intercultural interactions (Frank, 2013).

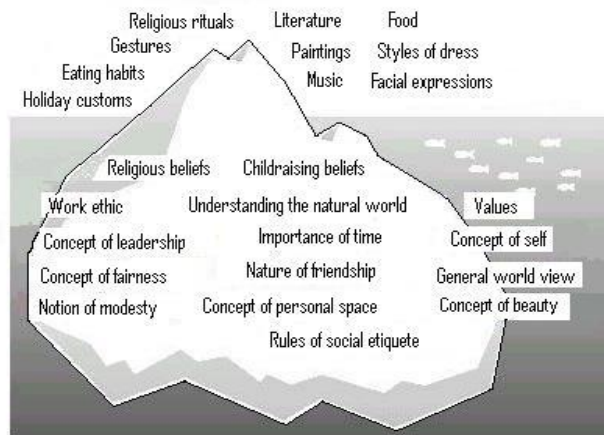


Fig. 1. Hall's Iceberg Model of Culture

Without a deep understanding of culture, the reality of what is actually happening and/or why it is not happening in intercultural encounters can remain inconspicuous. When people do not understand the nonvisible aspects of culture, they often interpret the words and actions of others through their own cultural lens, which many argue is the first step to misunderstanding in intercultural interactions (Ting-Toomey Dorjee, 2018; Nuliep, 2020; Lustig and Koester, 2020; Jandt, 2021).

A good exercise is a blank cultural iceberg challenge where students have to write visible and nonvisible aspects of their own culture and discuss their answers in class. Teachers can also give specific examples from English-speaking cultures and contrast them with elements from the students' own culture. For instance, a teacher may explain that while Americans appreciate eye contact with interlocutors, it does not mean that they stare during the entire interaction. Here, it should be highlighted that the nonvisible aspects of culture may be the most difficult for the students to identify. Aspects like the

nature of friendships, concepts of food, notions of modesty, concepts of cleanliness, gender roles, preferences for competition and cooperation are just some of the nonvisible aspects that students might identify. Again, the idea is to raise awareness of these nonvisible aspects of culture to uncover the unique values and beliefs that explain why people from different cultures behave differently (Frank, 2013). After students have identified aspects of culture from each level, teachers can compare aspects of the students' native culture and those of English-speaking cultures to point out the similarities and differences between cultures.

3. Teaching particular cultures: This is perhaps the most difficult part of teaching cultures where teachers should explain Hall's low-context and high-context cultures and Hofstede's cultural dimensions. This is very important for ESP students because it best categorizes cultures and helps students understand the differences between them, which, in turn, can help students to avoid making unintentional cultural mistakes in their future jobs.

Teachers can start with Hall's low-context and high-context cultures, which represent communication patterns in a culture, that is, how explicit the messages exchanged in a culture are and the importance of context in communication. For instance, the easiest way for teachers to explain the difference between these two types of cultures is that low-context cultures believe that good communication has to be explicit. This is well-explained by a leadership speaker, Erin Mayer² who, in one of her lectures, said, that "if you want to understand blue I have to say "blue" and explain it. If I deliver a presentation I should tell you what I am going to tell you and that I should tell you what I have told you. Why do I repeat? Because I want to make sure that the message was passed clearly". Here, the teacher can play Mayer's video on YouTube.

On the other hand, as Mayer points out in her lecture, high-context cultures believe that good communication is more implicit, layered and nuanced. People know what is being decided and know what will happen next. There is no need to go through it over and over again. This means that interlocutors from low-context cultures are expected to be straightforward and concise, while those from high-context cultures depend less on language precision and may come across as ambiguous to people from low-context cultures.

Simply put, high-context cultures (many Asian, Middle Eastern, European and Latin American cultures) are characterized by long-lasting social relationships, spoken agreements, and mutual trust while low-context cultures (English-speaking countries) tend to be individualistic, goal-oriented and are inclined to value directness with discussions resulting in actions (Guffey and Loewy, 2009). Because of these differences, interactions between members of high- and low-context cultures can cause problems especially in international business, which is important for ESP students to learn. For instance, in certain situations, someone from a high-context culture may find someone from a low-context culture to be too direct and possibly impolite, while people from low-context cultures may feel that high-context people are uncommunicative and unforthcoming.

Here, an interesting activity is to challenge students individually or in a group to identify aspects from high- and low-context cultures that correlate with their own culture and justify their answers. The teacher could first introduce the high-low context framework for analyzing cultural differences and explain that this is one of the possible ways to understand and analyze communication incidents that may come up in

² For more information check Erin Meyer: Low Context vs. High Context Societies at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9oYfhTC9IIQ>.

intercultural communication. The activity might start with a discussion on the impact of the high–low context of communication on the interaction between people who come from different cultures, which may lead to misunderstandings, conflicts and failed international projects. The teacher should ask the students to provide concrete examples when possible. To do so, the students would have to do some research on high- and low-context cultures. As a moderator and an observer, the teacher should capture the key points of the discussion as s/he monitors groups while going around the classroom. After the discussion is finished, the teacher should summarize the main discussion points for students to remember on the black, white or SMART board, and mention that high-low context communication modes might influence team work and cause conflict, which can be not only be unintentional but also intentional, which is always important to point out. At this stage, another interesting practice would be to think of scenarios where communication might break down based on different cultural contexts and include strategies to avoid potential conflict.

As far as Hofstede and Minkov's (2013) classification of national cultures are concerned, they represent the most difficult part of teaching culture. Here, the teachers should try to explain the six dimensions of culture which include: individualism/collectivism, power distance, uncertainty avoidance, masculinity/femininity, long-term/short-term orientation and indulgence/restraint. These dimensions influence almost every sphere of personal and professional life. The easiest and the simplest way for the teachers to explain these dimensions is as follows:

- Power distance explains the degree of equality or inequality between the people in the society, and it is defined as the degree to which less powerful members of institutions and organizations within a country expect and accept that power is distributed unequally. Examples of high power distance countries are China, France and South Korea; conversely, some low power distance countries are the U.S., Japan and the U.K.³
- Individualism/collectivism: In individualistic societies, people care primarily about themselves and their immediate family. In collectivist societies, people belong to “groups” that are cared for in exchange for loyalty. Individualistic societies are the U.S., France, Germany and the U.K. Collectivistic societies are mostly Asian countries and East-European countries (particularly Balkan countries).
- Masculinity/femininity: Masculinity indicates that society is driven by competition, achievements and success, where success is defined by the best. The value system, which begins to be learned and acquired as early as pre-school, is practiced throughout life. Masculine societies include Japan, China, Germany, the U.K. and the U.S., while feminine societies are France and South Korea.
- Uncertainty avoidance: Uncertainty avoidance is the degree to which members of a culture feel threatened by ambiguous or unknown situations. Societies with high uncertainty avoidance index are Japan, France, South Korea and Germany, while low uncertainty avoidance index are the U.S., the U.K. and China.
- Long-term/short-term orientation: This dimension shows society's relationship to time, i.e.: the past, present and future. For example, cultures with a short-term orientation that score low on this dimension are preoccupied with the past and the present (East Asia, Taiwan, Japan), while cultures with a long-term orientation are focused on the future (Anglo-American countries, Africa, and Latin America).

³ The countries mentioned here are just some of the countries that belong to each of these dimensions.

- **Indulgence/Restraint:** This dimension is defined as the degree to which people try to control their desires and impulses, based on the way they were raised. For instance, American society is often considered indulgent, while Russian society is more restrained.

What these classifications show is that people from different cultures not only communicate in different ways but also experience each situation differently. By comparing cultural values, students learn how to successfully overcome these differences and understand how people from different cultural backgrounds might respond in certain situations, which is again crucial for ESP students' professional life.

Here, interesting topics for classroom discussion could be:

- How is your culture positioned in Hofstede's classification of national cultures?
- Compare your culture to American, British, Canadian or Australian culture based on Hofstede's classification of national cultures.

4. **Teaching intercultural communication:** Intercultural communication is defined as communication between people from different cultures. At this stage, it is important to teach students that this type of communication is culturally specific with potential misunderstandings that may arise if one ignores the broader framework of a specific way of communication that is culturally conditioned. Students should already know that the exchange of information in intercultural communication is very complex because each culture interprets verbal and nonverbal codes differently. Different interpretations can jeopardize communication, especially if one cultural group believes in its perceptions of a particular culture (which are typically based on stereotypes and prejudices).

At this point, teachers also have the opportunity to show students the five most common barriers to intercultural communication: fear, assuming similarities instead of differences, stereotypes, ethnocentrism and nonverbal communication, which is imperative for any profession. Furthermore, teachers should also teach students what the characteristics of a good intercultural communicator are: inquiry, curiosity, empathy, motivation, risk-taking, reflection, observation, preparation and comparison. Intercultural listening is also important for students to understand and how it influences intercultural communication (i.e. the HURIER model⁴).

The following are just some of the questions for classroom discussion, taken from Martin and Nakayama (2018) and Samovar, Porter and McDaniel (2018):

1. Identify a problem in your life where communication has only worsened a situation.
2. Go to YouTube and search for a video on "cultural conflict", or "intercultural communication". Use your critical thinking skills when explaining what has happened in the video.
3. What are some generalizations about life in the US that an international student might draw from watching the *BBT*, *Modern Family*, *SATC* or your favorite American TV show?

⁴ The HURIER Model was developed by Judi Brownell, a professor of organizational communication in 1996. The model describes the six stages of listening. The word HURIER is an acronym, which stands for Hearing, Understanding, Remembering, Interpreting, Evaluating and Responding that are very important when listening and they can ensure good communication and understanding between the two individuals. Since many conflicts arise from a lack of communication or miscommunication, the HURIER model aims to eliminate this entirely by urging people to listen more effectively. Accordingly, the model is applicable in intercultural communication.

4. Make a list of changes in your culture that you have observed during your lifetime. Discuss how these changes have affected intercultural communication.
5. List 10 communication characteristics that you would like to develop if you were selected to visit another country as an exchange student.
6. Give specific examples of how each of the following components can be improved: motivation, knowledge and skills of intercultural communication competence.
7. Explain how and why communication and culture are linked.
8. How does intercultural communication differ from everyday forms of communication?
9. How can studying the intercultural communication aspects of nonverbal behavior assist you in discovering your own ethnocentrism?
10. Give your culture's interpretation of the following nonverbal actions:
 - Two people are speaking loudly, waving their arms and using many gestures.
 - A customer in a restaurant waves his hand over his head and snaps his fingers loudly.
 - An elderly woman dresses entirely in black.
 - A young man dresses entirely in black.
 - An adult pats a child's head.
 - Two men kiss in public.
11. What is meant by the phrase "communication is rule-governed"? Compare some of the different rules in the following concepts:
 - a meeting with your professor to discuss grades and a meeting at a social event.
 - giving your professional opinion to the company president and to a co-worker.
 - discussing a medical concern with a doctor and with a close friend.
12. What links stereotypes and intercultural communication?

As a point of note, teachers should always be aware of the motivations behind why students are learning ESP. In the majority of cases, the language will be used as a means of communication with others who do not speak English as a first language in which case, the main goal is to teach learners not only language and the knowledge attached to it but also how to become efficient intercultural communicators (Tomalin, 2010). This is one of the ways to make ESP classes exciting educational experiences.

3. USEFUL STRATEGIES FOR LEARNING ABOUT CULTURES AND CHALLENGES ALONG THE WAY

The absence of teaching about culture in the ESP classroom surfaces when it starts to create problems in intercultural interactions in professional life. To avoid this, one of the primary goals should be to teach and learn about culture at the very beginning of the ESP course because even very simple spoken language, such as greetings, tenses or pronouns, are strongly influenced by culture and should be taken into account during ESP classes (Jackson, 2020). Having this in mind, Liddicoat, Papademetre, Scarino and Kohler (2003) have listed five useful strategies that are the most important for teaching culture in the modern ESP classroom:

- Active construction: This enables students to accumulate knowledge about their own culture and the culture they are learning about, which will, in turn, help them to

notice the differences that exist between the source and the target culture. Here, the role of the teacher is to enable students to notice, explore and understand these differences.

- Making connections: This strategy encourages students to establish a connection between their culture and the new culture by comparison.
- Social interaction: This teaches students to understand the differences that can occur during communication when interlocutors come from different cultures.
- Reflection: This practice is very similar to the first one and gives students the opportunity to see and understand the differences that exist between cultures and how these differences are reflected in communication.
- Responsibility: This last strategy teaches students to appreciate and empathize with members of other cultures.

Another interesting strategy is what Paige *apud* Cohen et al. (2013) proposed - learning about different cultures by developing students' observation skills through authentic materials associated with a target culture. These could include popular movies, literature, food, etiquette, magazines, and newspapers from English speaking countries, depending on students' needs and course goals. By offering students the chance to get acquainted with actual things or visible aspects of a culture, teachers can connect concepts and help students understand life in that culture, which will lead to students' greater understanding of the more difficult nonvisible aspects of a culture that were mentioned earlier. In the context of ESP, this can be useful for the future professionals, especially during informal on-site and off-site meetings and dining with their peers from other cultures.

Students can also be given a task to prepare a presentation about the experience of living in English-speaking countries (real or virtual) and discuss cultural differences, verbal and nonverbal communication, active intercultural listening, stereotypes, prejudices, etc. Other students comment on the "experience" in an English-speaking country and assess not only intercultural behavior but also understanding of the culture. They can also compare it to their own culture, which is a perfect continuation of what they had already done in the previous stages.

Interesting written assignments could be the following essays:

- Cultural self-assessment essay: Knowledge of intercultural communication begins with an understanding of one's own culture: assumptions, values, mores, norms and behaviors, which, in turn, actively support intercultural communication. This assignment asks a student to carefully consider the ideas and beliefs about cultural identity with which they grew up and those to which they continue to subscribe. The following questions might help: What values, norms and beliefs did your parents or guardians attempt to instill in you? Why were these considered important? What factors in your experience have led to the development of positive feelings about your own cultural heritage and background? What factors have led to negative feelings, if any?
- Cultural group different from your own: Based on what they had written in their previous essay, students should think and address the following questions in this essay: Why did you choose this group? What do you know about this group? Does it have similar values and beliefs? Do its members have particular behavioral and communication patterns? How does this group fit into your worldview (or not)? Do you have any stereotypes and/or prejudices about this group? How is this group portrayed in popular culture? Does popular culture influence your opinion of this group? Provide concrete examples.

While all this might sound easy in theory, teaching culture in the ESP classroom does not come without challenges. The ongoing challenge is certainly fluency and the ability of ESP students to use the target language effectively and appropriately. The second challenge is the cultural content in current course books, which is just briefly mentioned. The cultural content or culture-based activities have not been designed in course books efficiently enough to be able to put target culture issues fully into practice (Tomalin, 2010). In addition to this, current approaches to teaching culture during ESP lessons are mostly nonexistent or barely tackled in class where the teachers decide to focus on business etiquette, active listening, or the rules of verbal or nonverbal communication across cultures.

Moreover, teachers who have spent little or no time outside their own countries might have difficulty understanding the diversity and complexity of English-speaking cultures. Today, this should be less of a problem since the Internet is a significant source of information. Conducting searches with specific questions or phrases like “Americans values and worldviews” or “What is the meaning of the American dream?” along with other relevant key word searches related to the target culture (e.g., symbols, beliefs, norms, mores) will provide the teachers with facts they can use to learn more about cultures and become cultural informants for their students (Frank, 2013).

Lastly, teachers must also stress that culture is just one of the many aspects of human behavior and that people all over the world differ from one another in a number of ways: gender, age, sexual orientation, personality, abilities, which all make them unique individuals. That said, teachers must be careful not to make statements like “He’s an American, so that’s why ...”, which will lead to positive or negative stereotypes or generalizations about a culture. Cultural groups share common characteristics, but teachers need to remind students that within each group there are a wide range of individual differences (Tomalin, 2020). The activities discussed in this article offer suggestions for teachers to help their students become more culturally aware as they get started.

4. CONCLUSION

While the idea of teaching culture in the ESP classroom is not new, teachers need to go beyond introducing only visible aspects of the target culture by incorporating a framework that enables students to understand the nonvisible aspects of a culture discussed in this article. As has been appreciated for some time now, simple mastery of the linguistic forms of a language is not enough for students to be considered competent in the target language (Krasner, 1999). This means that students must also understand the cultural contexts in which the target language is spoken.

One of the ways in which the ESP teacher can involve students more in the process of culture-specific language acquisition, is by assigning them activities that are both research-based and reflective in nature. Such exercises will encourage the learners to be actively involved in their learning by not only considering the experiences and expectations that they bring to the classroom, but also how they hope the learning of English (or any language, for that matter) and target cultures will be of benefit for their future endeavors. It is hoped that the aspects of culture explored in this article will provide a starting point for the ESP teachers to create opportunities for students to examine and reflect on the target culture and their own (source) culture, which will in turn make them efficient intercultural communicators who are ready to venture into the professional world after

completing the ESP course. This is why educators need to rethink the teaching of culture and include it as the fifth language skill in addition to the four traditional skills that they are already teaching.

Finally, teachers should appreciate that students who might never have traveled outside their country or even met an English language speaker might question why they need to study culture. As the world becomes increasingly interconnected for many different reasons, teachers must help their students to understand that it is more important than ever for them to be able to build their cultural knowledge to understand not only other cultures, but also their own as this skill will prove indispensable for both their personal and professional competence in the contemporary world.

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