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**Not a language lesson but a language workout: organizing a lesson around discrete learning activities in order to help students learn and concentrate**

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**Abstract**

This paper reports on the curriculum changes that were implemented in a three-hour per week two-year general English program for non-majors in a Japanese university. The changes to the English language curriculum were in response to the declining proficiency and motivation levels of the students entering the university. The most substantial changes to the curriculum involved reducing the task-based learning strand, and dividing individual lessons into mostly discrete receptive learning activities. The first part of the study will focus on the rationale and planning of the curriculum. The second part of the paper will present the findings of a student survey that we conducted to evaluate the curriculum changes.

**Keywords:** task-based learning, extensive reading, demotivation, receptive learning

**Introduction**

To date there is a lack of language teaching literature describing how teachers teach and manage classrooms of students with low levels of language ability and

equally low levels of motivation. This is surprising considering that in many contexts this type of language classroom represents the norm rather than the exception. This study reports on the curriculum changes we made to our university required English language program in Japan in response to an increase of students with low levels of English ability and motivation. We made four major changes to the curriculum. First, we reduced the task-based learning (TBL) strand, which in the old curriculum comprised a majority of class time. Second, we introduced a number of receptive and traditional learning activities. Third, students did these new activities every class for short periods of 10 to 20 minutes. Fourth, we created a more coordinated program, where some of the new activities were done across classes. I will discuss the rationale behind these changes, and present the findings of a student survey that we conducted to evaluate the curriculum changes.

## **Background**

The students in this study were from a less competitive women's university in Japan. These students were non-English majors taking two 90-minute required English classes each week for two years. This '3hpw' program is typical for many universities in Japan, and usually involves a Japanese instructor teaching one class while a native speaker instructor teaches the other. In our university almost all of the first year students based on the CEFR (Common European Framework of References for Languages) are at a pre A1 level of proficiency, even in relation to receptive skills. This means that most of our students have yet to achieve the most basic level of recognized proficiency on the CEFR. This fact is not unusual as Tono and Negishi (2012: 109) report that 50 per cent of Japanese high school students at the end of their fifth year of study have not reached A1. In addition to this lack of very basic proficiency, most of our new students based on their learning experiences in high school, dislike learning English. We have found that like Sakai and Kikuchi's (2008) analysis of demotivation in Japanese high school students, our first year students' lack of interest in learning English, and often dislike for it, is rooted in a combination of poor test scores and having in high school primarily studied English through grammar-based methods with difficult texts.

For almost a decade the main feature of our curriculum had been our task-based learning (TBL) curriculum (see Willis and Willis 2007). We introduced TBL in response to the grammar-based teaching methods that most of our students had

experienced in high school. We felt that a ‘learning by doing’ approach would help students develop basic proficiency as well as improve their attitudes to learning English. Our initial assumptions proved correct as student course-end surveys showed an improved attitude towards learning English. Students under the new TBL curriculum also showed greater gains on the course-end achievement test than students had with the old curriculum. Stakeholders in the university noticed these positive changes, and after two years the language curriculum was expanded to include all the departments in the university.

In recent years we started to notice, as placement tests also confirmed, that new students entering the university had substantially lower levels of English proficiency and motivation. More teachers reported that their classes struggled with TBL, and, moreover, often reacted negatively towards it. TBL classrooms generally involve “naturalistic learning” (see Swan 2005: 2), where students use their current available linguistics resources to complete tasks. It became apparent that our new students lacked the basic linguistic resources to engage in meaningful task work. In addition many students lacked experience with communicative methodologies, as more students came from high school English programs that had a very small communicative strand or nothing at all.

To address this new problem, teachers in the program started trying out new classroom management techniques and learning activities. We also conducted surveys and feedback sessions to identify the learning preferences of the new students. At the end of the year we compiled a number of general observations about our students:

- prefer receptive learning (listening and reading)
- struggle with task-based learning (naturalistic learning)
- try hard for tests and any activity they know will be graded
- like learning vocabulary
- prefer individual work over pair work/group work
- lose interest in an activity/task after 10-20 minutes.

We then used these findings to make a number of changes to the curriculum. First, we decreased the amount of TBL from around 80 minutes per each of the two classes to between 45–60 minutes for at least the communication class. We changed the class mostly taught by Japanese teachers to listening skills. Teachers in this class were

encouraged to incorporate some TBL into their lessons, and the material made it easy to do, but it was no longer required. The most substantial change involved ‘breaking up’ or ‘chunking’ the lesson into short discrete learning activities.

Figure 1

Native speaker teacher class	Japanese teacher class
Extensive reading (10-15 minutes)	Extensive reading (10-15 minutes)
Vocabulary cards practice (10-20)	Vocabulary cards practice (15-20)
EIKEN practice. (15-30)	EIKEN practice (15-20)
Task-based writing/speaking (30-45)	Listening skills (30-45)

We had introduced extensive reading (ER) (see Day et al. 2011), with graded readers three years prior to the new changes. It was the first change we made to adapt to the decreasing proficiency levels of our students. We found it to be very popular even with our most challenging classes, and for the new curriculum we decided to expand it from one class to both classes. For the new activity vocabulary cards, students had to chose and then make and memorize word cards from first 2000 high frequency words from the British National Corpus (BNC). Most students are familiar with making vocabulary cards as it is widely used in high schools. Teachers used the same frequency list to organize vocabulary activities, games, and quizzes for the classroom. These mostly teacher-directed activities introduced a more lexical approach (see Lewis 1983) to language learning. During our initial trialing we found that students enjoyed learning vocabulary, and a more lexical approach to language learning seemed easier for students to grasp than a grammar-first focus. We decided on the BNC list because the elementary textbooks that we use do not contain a sufficient number of even the first 1000 high frequency words. Our test data also showed that most of our students could not recognize an adequate number of the first 1000 words in English.

The second new activity we added was EIKEN proficiency test practice. The EIKEN proficiency test is a well-known proficiency test endorsed by the Japanese Ministry of Education. The appeal of EIKEN is that it has seven levels that test-takers can choose from based on their current ability. Despite the literature that suggests this type of learning can be demotivating (see Kikuchi 2013, and Falout et al. 2013), our feedback from students suggested that many preferred test-oriented learning because

of their familiarity with it, and its practicality. Even prior to the new curriculum students regularly commented that for required English classes they preferred to study for proficiency tests because a potentially good score could be used for future job hunting. In the new curriculum we did not require students to take the actual EIKEN tests. We did however use the EIKEN placement test at the start, middle point, and end of the program to place students in classes and check for any improvements. Students received each test result and included in the results was information on which EIKEN level their language ability was at. For each year the placement test counted for a small percentage (15 per cent) of the students' final grade. One more benefit we identified for introducing EIKEN practice is that it contained a lot of high frequency vocabulary that our main textbooks and readers did not have. We concluded that EIKEN practice would be a good way to present these high frequency words in context, and give students repeated exposure to them.

Finally, as part of the new curriculum, we decided to have students do some of the activities, in particular ER, vocabulary cards, and EIKEN twice a week with both teachers. We did this to compensate for the short periods these activities would be focused on in an individual class. We knew that students often had trouble staying focused for even half the time of a 30-45 minute activity, but for short activities of 10-20 minutes they seemed to have less trouble staying engaged from start to completion.

During trialing we recognized that the new curriculum with its many activities made good time management by the teacher very important. To help teachers avoid cramming activities in, we told teachers that they could do the activities in any sequence, and that they could adjust the times to fit their class levels and interests. Teachers were not permitted to opt out of activities. One time management suggestion we offered teachers was for them to organize a lesson over two-classes and across them introduce a 'focus' and 'review' rhythm for some of the activities. Simply, 'focus' involves spending a larger proportion of class time on a new topic, material, or activity while 'review' of an activity is done quickly. For example in one lesson some of the activities are focused on while the others are reviewed. A week later the pattern is reversed.

## Method

At the end of the first year we conducted a very simple four-question survey to investigate students' attitudes towards the new curriculum. We used a Likert scale (1= not at all 2= not really 3= so so 4= quite a lot 5= very much) for the first three questions, and ranking scale for the fourth question. The four questions were in Japanese, and for the first three questions students were asked to explain their choices.

1) Your English lesson is divided into different activities. For example in class you usually read a book, do vocabulary card practice, EIKEN, and then an English task (listening/writing/speaking) Do you like this type of lesson where you do many activities in one lesson?

2) Do you like studying or doing one thing, topic, language point or activity for almost the whole lesson?

3) Do you like doing the same activities read a book, vocabulary cards, and EIKEN practice twice a week?

4) Please rank which activities you like the best: reading a book, EIKEN practice, vocabulary cards, listening activity, speaking task, writing task. 1 is most favorite, 2 is second favorite, 3 is third favorite and so on.

## Results

We collected 411 surveys or 89 per cent of the first year student population. For the first question we wanted to know how students felt about having an English class divided into mostly short discrete learning activities.

Table 1. Question 1 results

1= not at all	2= not really	3= so so	4= quite a lot	5= very much	mean
5	38	274	66	28	3.18

While the raw data especially the large *so so* group suggested that students had a somewhat neutral attitude, an analysis of the *so so* group's responses revealed a clear positive attitude towards the lesson type. From this group 224 students gave clear positive reasons while only five gave negative ones. Below are the main categories that emerged from the students' explanations. The heading *various positive comments*

refers to any explanation that was clearly positive (e.g. it's a good system), but did not fit the main responses.

Table 2. Student explanations for question 1

Number of students	Explanation
57	I don't get bored
55	I like doing a variety of activities
52	I can concentrate better
16	I can change my feeling with each activity
44	Various positive comments
5	Various negative comments
45	Left blank or not relevant

The second question reflected what students experience in most classes where they may have to listen to a lecture on a certain theme for 90 minutes, or in a language class where a teacher will usually focus on a unit, topic, or language point for most of the class.

Table 3. Question 2 results

1= not at all	2= not really	3= so so	4= quite a lot	5= very much	mean
19	201	158	25	8	2.52

The results showed that just over half of the students responded negatively with a *not really* or *not at all*. Of the 158 *so so* responses only 62 students gave a positive explanation for their choice.

Table 4. Student explanations for question 2

Number of students	Explanation
25	Various positive reasons
20	Can concentrate better
9	Can study in detail
8	Easier to understand
11	Depends on topic
11	Various negative reasons
47	No explanation given
27	Not relevant

Of the 47 non-explanations, 27 were from students who gave a high mark (4 or 5) for question one accompanied by a supporting explanation. Of the 201 students in the *not really* response category, 180 gave clear negative explanations for their choice.

Table 5. Student explanations from the *not really* group for question 2

Number Students	Explanation
77	Get bored/tired
60	Lose concentration/cannot concentrate
25	Like doing different things in class
18	Various negative reasons
21	No explanation given or not relevant

The third question investigated if students liked doing ER, vocabulary cards and EIKEN twice a week.

Table 6. Question 3 results

1= not at all	2= not really	3= so so	4= quite a lot	5= very much	Mean
9	101	245	41	15	2.88

The raw data suggested a negative orientation, but the students' explanations from both the *not really* and *so so* groups revealed a more positive attitude. 157 students who indicated *so so* gave positive explanations while only four students from the same *so so* group gave negative comments. The majority of students who gave positive explanations either indicated they liked their teachers, or they liked the system of having one native speaker teacher and one Japanese teacher. It should be noted that this question produced the least amount of explanations.

Table 7. Student explanations from *so so* group for question 3

Number of students	Explanations
90	Positive comments
35	Enjoy reading
23	Easy to remember/better for learning
9	Like vocabulary cards/learning
4	Negative reason
84	No explanation or not relevant

In the *not really* group of the 101 students only 68 students gave explanations. Of this group 26 students commented that they did not like doing at least one of the different activities. Another 25 students commented that they wanted to do the activities in only one class. 15 students gave clear negative responses that doing the activities twice a week was either boring, too repetitive or that the different teachers' techniques for the same activity confused them.

For the final question we asked students to rank the activities in terms of personal preference with 1 being their most preferred.

Table 8. Question 4 results (387 responses)

Final Rank	Activity	1	2	3	4	5	6	mean
1	Listening	93	112	76	48	41	17	2.69
2	Reading ER	163	55	45	34	37	53	2.70
3	Vocab Cards	32	88	77	72	71	47	3.52
4	Speaking	51	52	62	66	70	86	3.8
5	EIKEN	32	51	60	79	74	91	3.99
6	Writing	16	29	65	94	99	84	4.2

As the raw data shows students preferred receptive activities over productive activities, especially writing.

## Discussion

Starting with the third question and whether students liked doing some activities twice a week, the results after analyzing the explanations revealed that only 49 students or 12 per cent of the students in this study indicated a dislike for it. In contrast 213 students or 52 per cent had a favorable opinion of doing some activities twice. As mentioned this question in the neutral *so so* response produced a lot of non-explanations (84 students). We interpreted these responses in this category to indicate a non-issue with repeating activities. This group combined with the positive group suggests that the majority of students have a neutral or favorable view of doing the same activities twice a week. One reason for this is that students liked their teachers, and as many students pointed out in their explanations each teacher had different ways of doing the same activities.

With the first two questions in the study we wanted to investigate if students preferred a class organized around short discrete often unrelated learning activities, or the more common type of class where a topic, unit, language point is covered for almost the whole class. The results favored the short discrete activities class. Adding all the positive responses from the *so so*, *quite a lot*, and *very much* groups, 323 students or 79 per cent of the students in the study liked having their classes divided into different and mostly short discrete learning activities. Students felt they could

concentrate and engage in individual activities better because of the brevity of each activity; and, furthermore, the variety of the activities allowed students to reset or refocus their attention numerous times throughout the 90-minute lesson.

Question two results showed clearly that students had a less favorable opinion of the typical class that focuses on a single topic, unit or language point for almost the whole lesson. 258 students or 63 per cent of the students in this study indicated either a negative orientation to this type of class or a preference for the other class. In contrast 95 students or 23 per cent of the students, still a substantial number, noted a preference for classes that are based on one theme or topic. The overall negative orientation involved the same reasons as the first question but expressed reversely. The results for these two questions suggest that for the type of student reported in this study teachers should consider organizing at least a portion of their class around a number of short discrete learning activities.

For the final question we wanted to learn which language activities students preferred. Our recent trialing of different activities prior to the new curriculum revealed that students generally preferred more receptive activities to productive activities. The results from this study support our assumption. Students ranked extensive reading and listening as the most popular learning activities and task-based writing as the least popular. This result confirmed that our prior task-based learning curriculum, which was heavy on productive skills, and in particular writing, had probably had a demotivating effect on many of our students. The extensive reading results are interesting because it is often assumed by teachers that students with low proficiency and low motivation do not enjoy reading. We would suggest that the students' preference for receptive activities is because basic receptive skills are easier to develop than basic productive skills; and, moreover, receptive learning activities are less face threatening. We would add that while most of our students see little or no need for productive skills, they do value some receptive skill ability because of the prevalence of English in popular media.

The ranking question and teacher feedback also confirmed that students had positive attitudes towards the traditional activities of rote vocabulary learning and test practice, especially the former. Vocabulary card practice ranked as the clear third choice while test practice ranked fifth out of six activities. Despite this relatively low ranking for test practice, the overall numbers show that 37 per cent of the students placed it in their top three activities. Almost every teacher in his or her feedback

acknowledged the popularity of vocabulary card learning. With test practice while three of the 20 teachers in the program noted it as unpopular, seven teachers somewhat surprisingly indicated it as one of the students' favorite activities. For most teachers it was the first time they had taught EIKEN. This is probably the main reason why we found it, regardless of the class placement level, to be very popular in some classes and very unpopular in other classes. We learned during the year that some teachers found it relatively easy to design and implement EIKEN teaching materials while other teachers struggled with it. Our impression is that as teachers in our program develop more familiarity with it that its popularity amongst the students will improve. The relative popularity of these two types of activities suggests that in our context traditional teacher-directed methods like test practice or memorizing vocabulary can be viewed by students as positive learning activities. We would argue that it is not the activities per se, but rather how they are taught and learned in the classroom and for what purpose. We chose these activities, because our students seemed more engaged and comfortable learning English through them than with more communicative activities. The final important finding for the activities preference question is that even the least popular activity writing, had a substantial group of students who placed it in their first three choices. This finding like the findings from the first two questions suggests that programs and classes need to offer students a variety of learning activities and experiences.

As a classroom-based study it is important to comment on teacher reactions to the new curriculum. The feedback we received from the teachers throughout the year and from their final written feedback supported the main findings from the survey. Every teacher noted that students responded very well to the new curriculum, and that breaking a lesson up into different activities done for short periods kept the students engaged and productive. Almost all of the teachers found the lesson planning to be relatively easy, and noted no major problems with managing time or having to cram activities in. A few teachers did at times struggle with the fact that some of these discrete activities could not be integrated or related to each other. Some teachers as well as students noted that a few of the teachers who shared the same students, particularly in the first semester, gave conflicting directions and expectations for the activities that were done twice a week. This created some confusion and frustration for the students, and forced some teachers to alter their teaching or rules.

## Conclusion

In concluding we hope this paper offers teachers in similar challenging contexts specific ideas for teaching and learning. The larger theme for this paper is that teachers must always adapt their teaching and classroom practices to their students' needs and learning preferences. In adapting teachers need to trust their intuitive knowledge about what works in their classrooms. Even making small changes like adjusting the time of activities, or changing learning activities can have a substantial impact on the students' learning.

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## **Perceived Stress, Burnout and Coping Strategies of Native and Non-Native English Speaking Teachers in Japan**

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### **Abstract**

Due to a variety of work pressures, teachers face different types of stress. However, the many mental health related issues that teachers of English face are often ignored. Focusing on teachers of ESL in contemporary Japan, this study affirms the existence of stress as a definite problem and identifies a range of coping strategies that are being applied. Differences between the way native and non-native English speaking teachers deal with stress are examined. Although both groups share certain significant stressors, the study shows that each group tends to apply a contrasting set of coping strategies. These findings help to streamline approaches that assist teachers in coping with stress and have clear implications for teacher training curricula design.

**Keywords:** stress, burnout, coping strategies, NEST (Native English Speaking Teachers), NNEST (Non-native English Speaking Teachers)

## **Introduction**

Nowadays, English as Second Language (ESL) teachers, along with teachers in other fields, have even heavier responsibilities than before, and studies show that teaching is one of the most stressful jobs when compared to other occupations (Adams 2001). In an area like language teaching where such a high degree of interaction between teachers and learners is involved, attention to teachers' needs and concerns is very important. However, it has been the researchers' observation that the many mental health related issues that teachers of English face are often ignored.

A significant number of occupational stressors within the teaching environment have been identified. These include work overload, role ambiguity and conflict, pressures of the teachers' role, poor working conditions, lack of professional recognition, low remuneration, lack of involvement in decision-making, lack of effective communication, staff conflicts and student misbehavior (Kim, 2009). Such conditions put teachers in great danger of psychological distress and increasing job dissatisfaction. ESL teachers, in particular, are encouraged to empathize with learners, keep them motivated, and perform a multitude of other tasks. Meanwhile, the possibility of positive or negative encounters with parents, colleagues, administrative authorities and students can all affect teachers psychologically (Mousavi, 2007).

The recognition of these problems prompted the authors to undertake the current study, focusing specifically on contemporary Japan where they are currently active as ESL educators. It was intended that the results might help streamline more efficient teacher copying strategies, provide information pertinent to the design of ESL teacher training curricula and insights of potential interest to all those involved in the areas of health or education.

## **Related Literature**

Relevant literature identifies diverse stressors in a variety of educational settings and highlights the serious potential consequences for schools and their student bodies if these issues are not addressed. Previous work has examined teachers' stress in general (Adams 2001; VanDick and Wagner 2001; Schamer and Jackson 1996; Jenkins and Calhoun 1991). A useful definition of teacher stress is provided by Kyriacou and Sutcliffe (1979 and 2001) who see it as a response syndrome of negative affect (such as anger and depression), usually accompanied by

physiological changes (such as increased heart rate), resulting from aspects of the teacher's job as a threat to his or her self-esteem or well-being. Country specific studies within East Asia (Kim, Lee and Kim 2009; Kennedy 1999) and studies that relate more specifically to language teaching (Horwitz 1996; Arnold 1999; Shannin 2011) have also been conducted. Relevant work exploring stress in native and non-native EFL teachers by Mousavi (2007) also had some bearing on the methodology of the current study.

### **Study Background and Methodology**

Despite the deserved attention the area of teacher stress has received, there has been very little specific work done on this issue in ESL within Japan and this study sought to redress the balance. The study aimed to assess the mental health of ESL teachers and identify significant stressors and coping strategies that teachers currently apply. It also sought to discover whether there are differences in the ways Native Speaking English Teachers (NEST) and Non-native English Speaking Teachers (NNEST) cope with stress, a feature initially stimulated by the presence of both groups of teachers amongst the researchers' immediate colleagues. Greater understanding of these factors can assist greatly in finding out how to reduce the effects of stress and improve the quality of education that teachers are able to offer to their students.

In this study, a generally qualitative framework consisting of questionnaire and interviews was used. A self-assessment questionnaire was considered most appropriate since such an approach is particularly useful when exploring the emic dimension of professional experience, and the "inter correlations amongst various feelings and perceptions" (Spector, 1994, p.390). Some of the questions were taken from a questionnaire used previously by Mousavi 2007. Interviews with selected respondents also helped to provide further insights. The questionnaire was designed to examine the following five categories:

1. Views on teaching and stress shared by NEST and NNEST
2. NEST and NNESTs' disparate views
3. Stress symptoms
4. Burnout symptoms
5. Coping strategies to combat burnout and stress

Participants were initially sourced from the authors' colleagues and friends and chosen randomly from various places in Japan and asked if they would be willing to take part by answering a questionnaire either manually or electronically. All were either full time or part-time teachers of ESL, and active in their respective locations at the time of the study. Participants also provided general personal information. This helped to position them within NEST and NNEST groups in order to discover differences and check for finer grained nuances between the two sets of respondents. A total of twenty-three participants, including thirteen NNEST and ten NEST were willing to answer the questionnaire. Participants included teachers from America, Australia, New Zealand, Philippines, Japan and Vietnam.

## **Results and Discussion**

Responses revealed both shared and disparate views between native and non-native English speaking ESL teachers and also helped to highlight areas of significant concern.

### **Shared Views**

The majority of participants claimed to be clear about their responsibilities as English teachers and most teachers, especially NNEST, were satisfied with their relationship with their employer. However, close to half of all participants were also concerned about lack of professional recognition on the part of management (42% of NEST and 56% of NNEST) and lack of effective communication among co-workers (50% of NEST and 50% of NNEST). The lack of opportunities for staff development was also a concern shared by both groups (48% of NEST and 52% of NNEST).

### **Disparate Views**

A stark contrast appeared between NNEST, who were in unanimous agreement that conflict between co-workers affects ESL/EFL teaching performance, and NEST, who had the opposite perception. The feeling of having some say on how to do their job was much stronger in the NEST group (62% NEST and 38% of NNEST). Further disempowerment was also suggested by the finding that some NNEST (32%) felt stressed when they could not fail the students who they considered did not deserve to pass. NNEST also felt more strongly that their level of responsibility as a teacher had increased (60% of NNEST compared to 40% of NEST).

It was interesting to note the extent to which NEST believed the status of English teachers as educators has generally declined (86% NEST and 14% of NNEST). This perception of a decline in standards is reinforced by NESTs' similarly strong notion that the reality of their current teaching practice contradicts their beliefs about teaching (67% of NEST and 23% of NNEST). The greater number of NEST who felt that they possessed insufficient knowledge of English grammar and teaching techniques (62% of NEST and 38% NNEST) may have also influenced this view.

NEST appeared generally less tolerant of ambiguity than NNEST. They felt comparatively more stressed when they faced unpredicted situations, could not make students understand a point or were asked something they did not know. These teachers were satisfied with their salary but felt stress when they couldn't explain themselves clearly because of the language barrier. However, NEST tended to be less stressed when teaching lowly motivated students (46% for NEST and 54% of NNEST).

Many more NNEST (82%) felt stressed when students addressed them by their first names than NEST and valued a show of respect towards them as teachers, such as being addressed "Ma'am", or "Sir". This points to interesting socio-cultural differences in views on the status of teachers, classroom etiquette and appropriate teacher-student relationships, areas that invite further investigation.

### **Areas of Significant Concern**

Shared concerns that teachers lack professional recognition and opportunities for staff development appear significant. Many NNEST held the belief that their institutions needed to organize effective workshops to reduce teachers' stress (78%). Shared concerns about lack of effective communication among co-workers, however, appeared only to significantly affect the performance of the NNEST group, who also felt disempowered and worried about workplace conflict and increased responsibilities. Many NNEST worried about peer evaluation (70%) and unfair rules concerning remuneration (83%), contrasting with NESTs' satisfaction in this regard. NNESTs concern about courtesy towards teachers, also not shared by NEST, could indicate either that Japanese students show relatively less respect towards them, or that NNEST possess their own culturally biased educational paradigm, developed outside the relatively more casual norms of current inner-circle countries.

Occupational issues found to be significant to NEST included feeling stressed by redundancy and job cuts (60%) and the feeling that they lacked involvement in decision-making in their institutions (70%). NEST beliefs about the decline in the status of English and their current teaching practice contradicting their beliefs also appears important. It points to incongruence between the reality of the situation in Japan and expectations of professional practice based on an education and upbringing in inner-circle English speaking countries. However, the extent to which these teachers view English as culturally grounded, and expect its use to be accompanied by certain related behavioral norms was not interrogated in this study.

### **Stress Symptoms**

Stress symptoms were experienced more often in the case of NEST who complained of stomach upset (100% of NEST), periods of confusion and lack of interests about things, recurrent thoughts about bad experiences, sweating excessively and feeling their hearts pounding. All NEST (100%) reported avoiding people completely when they were experiencing stress, had panic attacks and felt nervous around people. 76% reported nightmares and 60% had recurrent thoughts of past bad experiences.

All NNEST (100%) had suffered from forgetfulness, lost interest in things and experienced chest pain and 60% had trouble paying attention and headaches. The surprisingly high number of NNEST (82%) who claimed to have burst into tears at some point suggests an educational environment fraught with emotional tension. A more detailed breakdown of stress symptoms can be seen in Figure 1.

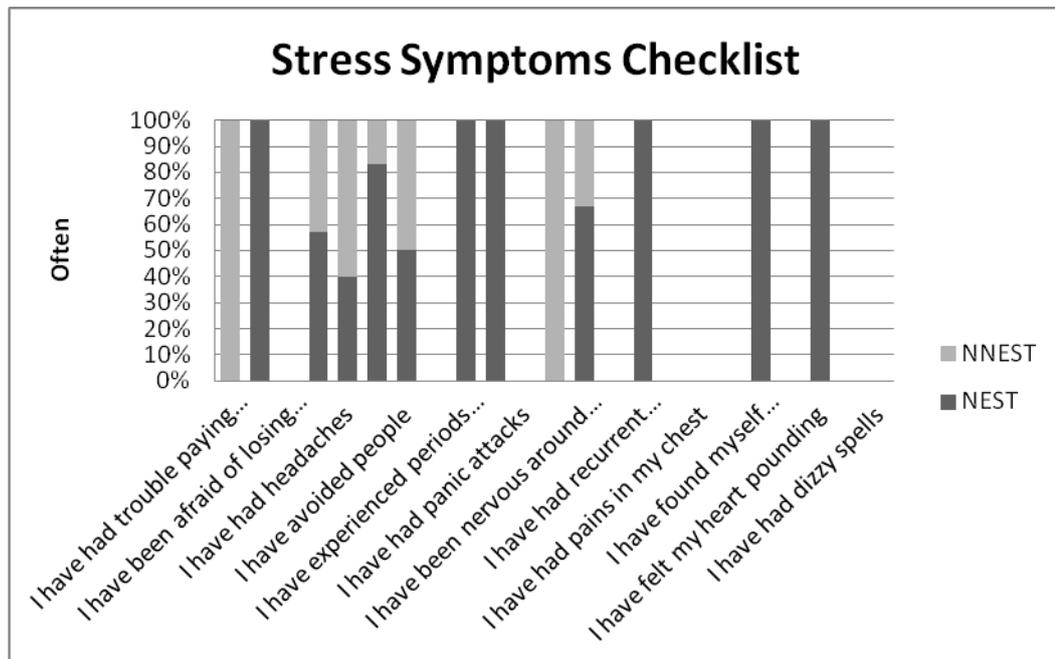


Figure 1. Stress Symptoms Checklist

### Burnout Symptoms

Many NEST reported feeling fragmented because their work entailed so many different tasks. They felt as if they were always watching the clock and reported experiencing a decreased sense of competence. A surprisingly high number of NEST (100%) claimed avoiding conversations with co-workers, rigidly applying rules without considering more creative solutions and increasing their use of alcohol or drugs. They felt overloaded with work and lacking in access to social and professional support groups.

For NNEST sleep difficulties were most prominent. All NNEST (100%) worried at night because they felt that their job demanded coping with an angry public and 85% also felt tired even when they had sufficient sleep.

### Coping Strategies

NEST and NNEST were found to apply contrasting sets of coping strategies, which can be characterized as either avoidance or proactive acceptance. All NEST (100%) resorted to strategies such as sleeping and alcohol or drug use. These teachers did seek out someone for conversation or sympathy when they felt emotionally distressed. However, they lacked a sense of genuine agency in the workplace, reduced the effort they put into problem solving and further avoided their concerns by day

dreaming. 68% approached the workplace issues by telling themselves something like “this isn’t real”.

In contrast, NNEST tended towards a kind of resigned but proactive acceptance. All NNEST (100%) tried to get used to the idea that a particular situation had occurred, put their trust into their own religious belief and prevent other things from interfering with their efforts. They focused on dealing with problems without getting upset and letting their emotion out, or reducing their problem solving efforts. Perhaps the large number of NNEST who reported bursting into tears were accessing a kind of safety value, having stored up emotion over a sustained period of time. Figure 2 shows a more detailed breakdown of teachers’ coping strategies.

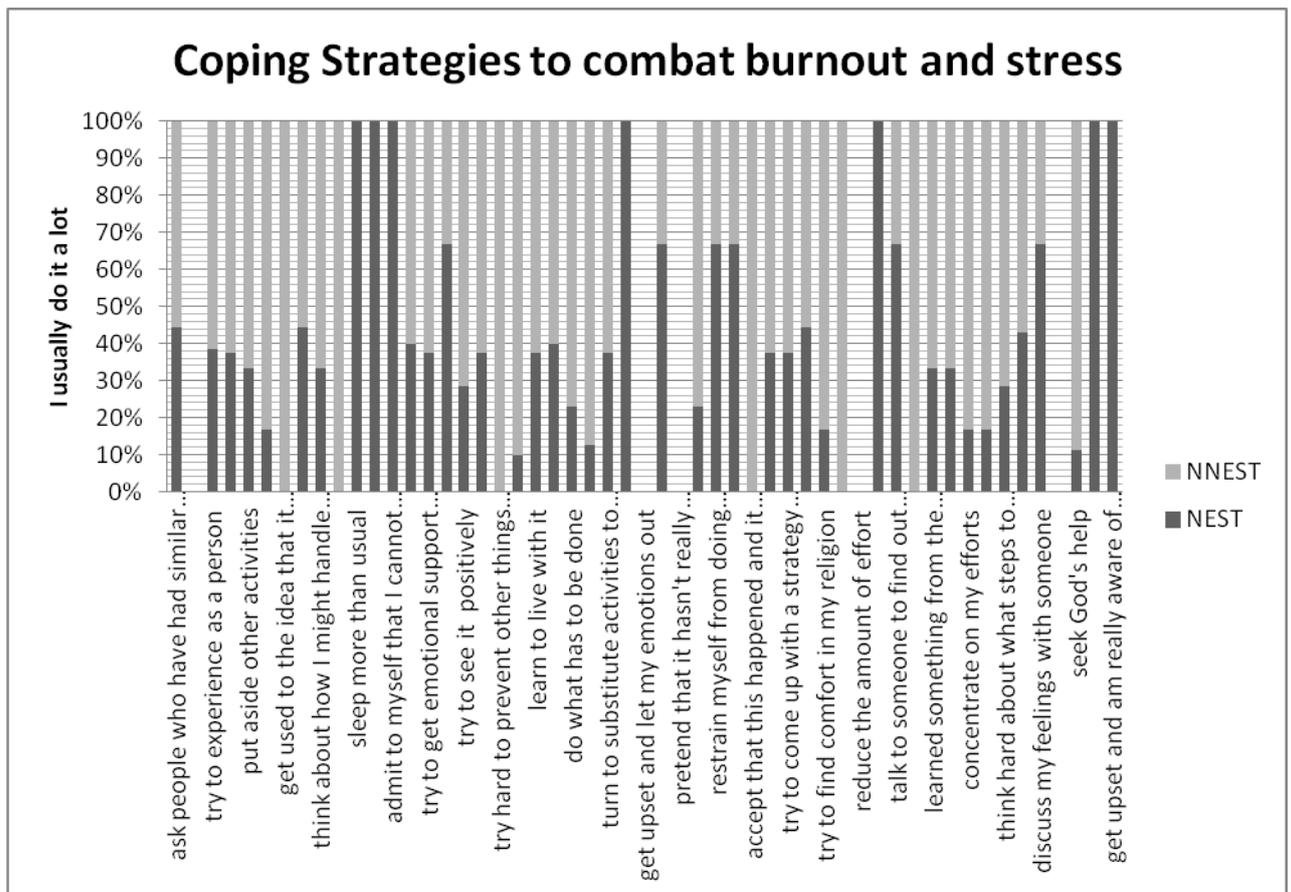


Figure 2. Coping strategies to combat burnout and stress

### Discussion

The findings presented so far, have clear implications for teacher training curriculum design. Firstly, given the reported lack of opportunities for professional development, teachers should be encouraged to independently pursue professional

development by joining associations like JALT or JACET. Secondly, before embarking on overseas contracts teachers need to be clearly informed about local norms of professional practice in their target location. NEST should abandon expectations that workplace norms and values in their new locations will resemble those in countries where English is a first language. Thirdly, a much more intense grammar focus would benefit NEST and counteract their sense of inadequacy. The observation that NEST felt they lack sufficient knowledge about English demands further investigation. Fourthly, ways need to be found to increase NNEST's confidence and help them maintain it in environments that tend to privilege native speakers. It may also be helpful to provide more examples early on in training of the more casual teacher/student status dynamics found in inner-circle educational contexts.

It would also be very helpful for new teachers to be informed accurately about potential stressors and given advice on how to cope. For example, there can be little argument that more physical exercise would benefit all teachers, NEST as a healthy alternative to alcohol and NNEST to counteract sleep difficulties. The need for social contact can also be met by joining professional bodies and the importance of such groups should not be underestimated. Loss of confidence and "day dreaming" can be avoided by creating a set of self evaluation criteria and for performance in the workplace that are independent of those held by the seemingly arbitrary ones provided Japanese employers of administrative staff. NEST can help NNEST by bolstering their confidence and encouraging them to release negative emotions on a more frequent basis.

## **Conclusion**

This study has clearly demonstrated that work-related stress is a significant problem for ESL teachers in contemporary Japan, identified significant stressors and provided detailed information on the way both NEST and NNEST cope with stress. The major sources of stress for all teachers appear to fall into physical, psychological/emotional or behavioral categories. A combination of these kinds of stress indicates burnout, and the dissatisfied and depressed condition of teachers tends to be contagious, even to the point where it seriously disrupts the relationship between teachers and students. It may also be true that conditions of employment, outside of

the control of the majority of teachers, are exacerbating the problem and much more effective support from employers is necessary.

Although this study pointed to the specific suggestions for training and coping strategies presented in the previous section, it is perhaps impossible to identify categorically what might be called “good” ways of coping (DeLongis and Puterman, 2007). There is no coping skill that once learned, becomes a magic bullet, effective with all kinds of stress. Therefore, flexibility of approach may actually be the key aspect of stress management. However, it may be beneficial to explore problem-focused, emotion-focused and relationship-focused coping styles as positive starting points.

The insights gained in this study may apply to other country-specific educational research and to studies of professional stress in general. Such data also informs the growing body of literature on the way humans adapt in new sociocultural environments.

The English-teaching industry in Japan today is truly intercultural work involving interpersonal challenges not found in the traditional monolingual subject classroom. As Japan prepares to host the Olympic Games in 2020, a highly stressed educational workforce cannot adequately support internationalization and it is of paramount importance that every effort be made to solve the problem.

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## **From home culture to intercultural knowledge base: implications for TESOL materials design**

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### **Abstract**

This paper focuses on the relationship between a language and its culture and will critically examine arguments for the incorporation of the target culture in TESOL teaching and learning together with teaching materials. The aim of the model suggested here is to enable the learners to develop an intercultural understanding of the target language which can be applied to e.g. business communication where English is used as the language of communication amongst different nationalities.

**Keywords:** culture, cultural imperialism, cultural re-imperialism, intercultural knowledge base, materials design

## **1. Introduction**

This article tries to clarify how language and culture are so interwoven that the separation of culture from language teaching hampers the full understanding and usage of the target language (TL). It has been claimed by some proponents of English as a Second or Foreign language (ESL/FL) learning communities that the inclusion of reference to the cultural context of the target language is a threat to the national identity of the learner and that it is thereby a form of cultural imperialism (See Bamon, 2004). Hence, in many contexts there has been a resentment and thus at least a whole-hearted endeavour to ignore the TL's culture. However, this article argues that due to the increase in global communication, there is a need for the shift in communication from a purely written based approach to a more integrated skills based approach. This shift towards a more pragmatic approach to communication is therefore one in which the TL's culture is an important and an inevitable aspect of TESOL education.

The relationship between language and culture has been an important issue in applied linguistics for some time (Hall, 2002). The study of culture along with language helps second language (L2) learners to understand and communicate pragmatically, and learners cannot achieve communicative competence if they do not understand the relationship between a language and its culture. Naumoska (2009) argues that to learn a second language, learners also need to learn about its cultural context. Learners can be aware of the inbuilt features of a language only if they understand its culture. Hudson (1980, p.78) posits '...meaning [of a language] is best studied in relation to culture...'. However, failure to comprehend the culture and contextual background of the TL, results in what Brown and Eisterhold (2004) call 'pragmatic error', often leading to miscommunication.

This paper argues that in TESOL materials design the TL's culture cannot be completely ignored but that both TL's culture and the second/foreign language learners' home culture should ideally be included so that the learners' intercultural communicative competence can be developed. This paper presents a model

suggesting approaches to cultural incorporation in TESOL materials design (*cf.* Section 6).

## **2. Importance of learning pragmatic aspect of a language**

In TESOL, one of the vital roles of a foreign language teacher is to raise awareness of pragmatic competence in the learners (Bardovi-Harling, Hartford, Mahan-Taylor, Morgan, Reynolds, 1991). Pragmatic competence is the ‘knowledge of speech acts and speech function, and sociolinguistic competence. Sociolinguistic competence entails the ability to select communicative acts according to context’ (Eslami-Rasekh, 2005, p.200).

It is, therefore, essential to be aware of the pragmatic aspect of a language as this varies across cultures. According to Wolfson (1989), sociolinguistic norms, variability and behaviour patterns are an important cause of miscommunication. Holmes (2001) claims different groups of people do not function in the same way, rather they accomplish ‘particular functions differently’ (p.258). Hence, the society and the culture in which a language approaches, influences its grammar and vocabulary (*ibid.*).

Different speech communities fail to understand each other not due to their failure to translate their home language into the TL, which they can but rather, because of their unwillingness to use the identical ways of considering and explaining the things (Kramsch, 1998). An example of ‘pragmatic failure’ may be related to what American president Nixon did in his visit to South America when, not understanding the South American culture, the president used two thumbs when meaning to make the OK sign to the crowd. Unfortunately this was ‘an obscene, insulting gesture to the audience’ (Brown & Eisterhold, 2004, p.138).

It would appear, therefore, that ‘pragmatic error’ is the result of a misunderstanding of the TL’s culture. The learners’ pragmatic construct may, however, be developed by exposing them to materials which integrate both the TL’s culture and the culture of learners’ home country simultaneously. The following section examines what is meant here by the term culture.

## **3. Culture**

Culture refers to ‘the customs and beliefs, art, way of life and social organization of a particular country or group’ (Hornby, 2005, p.373). Hence, culture

is a set of practices that are founded in the belief system of a group of people. The qualities that make a culture of one society distinct from others may include: ‘everyday living’, ‘living conditions’, ‘interpersonal skills’, ‘values, belief, attitudes’, ‘body language’, ‘social conventions’, and ‘ritual behaviour’ of that particular society (Naumoska, 2009, p. 2).

As every society has its own cultural ways of expression, behaviour and activities, it is logical that the functional and communicative aspects of a language of a particular society, which is used as a tool for communicating or carrying out these activities, can be different from those of other societies. This argument would support the claim that there is a strong relationship between a language and a culture. This relationship will be discussed in the following section.

#### **4. Language and culture: underlying relationship**

A language and a culture are so closely interlinked that individuals cannot divide the two without losing the importance of either language or culture (Brown, 1994). Moss (2002) argues that a language is closely bound to its culture; hence, learning the appropriacy of the language to use in different contexts is an important part of ‘communicative competence’ (p.24). Jiang (2000) examines the culture-language relationship through the following metaphors:

##### **From a philosophical view:**

Language + culture → a living organism  
 Flesh            blood

##### **From a communicative view:**

Language + culture → (Swimming communication)  
 Swimming skill    water

##### **From a pragmatic view:**

Language + culture → transportation (communication)  
 Vehicle        traffic light

(Jiang, 2000, pp. 328-329)

Therefore, from a philosophical view, both language and culture create a living organism. Here language is considered as flesh while culture is viewed as blood. The metaphor here indicates the intrinsic and inseparable bond between culture and

language for ‘without culture language would be dead; without language culture would have no shape’ (Jiang 2000, p. 328).

From communicative view, Jiang compares language with the ability to swim and water as the culture which is required if this skill is to be of use. This metaphor argues that ‘without language, communication would remain to a very limited degree (in very shallow water); without culture, there would be no communication at all’ (Jiang, 2000, p.329).

Finally, from a pragmatic view, communication is compared to transportation. Here language is seen as a vehicle and culture is viewed as traffic lights. So, as the idea of communication involves vehicle and traffic light, similarly, successful communication depends on the combination of both language and culture. Jiang (2000) claims ‘language makes communication easier and faster; culture regulates, sometimes promotes and sometimes hinders communication’ (p.329).

The implication of the relationship is that in TESOL, we cannot avoid the teaching of culture. Tseng (2002), for example, maintains that ‘...competence in language use is determined not only by the ability to use language with grammatical accuracy, but also to use language appropriate to particular context. Thus, successful language learning requires language learners to know the culture that underlies [a] language’ (p.11).

## **5. Whose culture in TESOL?**

The link between language teaching and culture in TESOL often leads to a debate particularly in ESL/FL countries as these countries have their own cultures. Hence, some people claim in TESOL that we should focus only on our own culture (ESL/FL learners’ own culture is referred here as home culture) regardless of the TL’s culture as this may constitute a threat to national identity through ‘cultural imperialism’ (Barrow in Harrison, 1990, p.3).

The reality, however, is that we cannot completely ignore the TL’s culture when we teach the TL. By completely ignoring the TL’s culture, the ESL/FL communities themselves could arguably be accused of the imposition of a form of cultural imperialism in that the TL’s culture is avoided- a fact we term as ‘cultural re-imperialism’ (our term).

The dilemma, hence, is that we can neither ignore the TL's culture(s) nor can we restrict ourselves to ESL/FL learners' home culture alone. The question is also how can we include so many English speaking cultures in a single textbook?

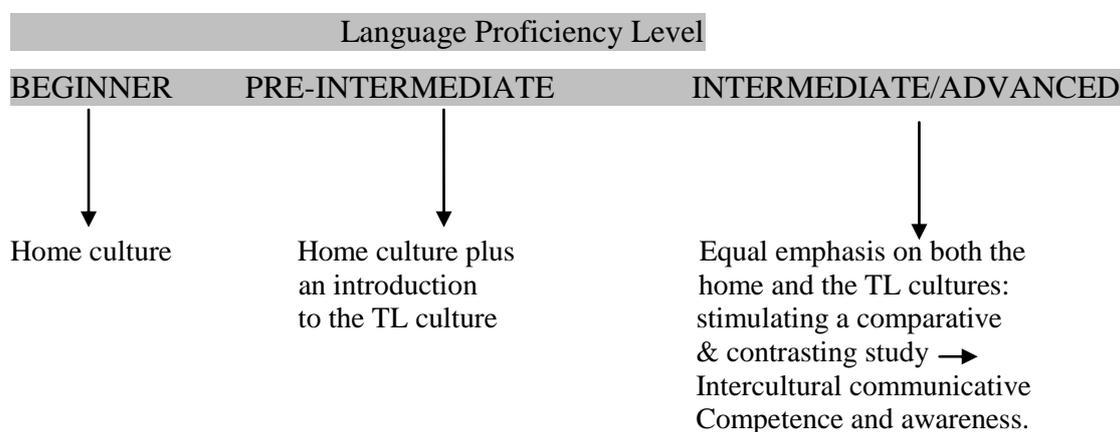
In TESOL, culture may be studied from three approaches: (a) Macro (b) Micro and (c) a Comprehensive approach. A Macro approach to culture refers to all the cultures in the world; this view more suitably fits within the philosophy of English as an International Language (EIL) (See, McKay, 2002) or English as a world language (EWL). The Micro approach to culture refers to either the TL's culture or learners' home culture alone. Finally, from a Comprehensive approach this paper refers to a combination of learners' home and TL's culture. This approach incorporates activities, behaviour, etc. that are both universal and different between cultures. The argument here is not for a macro or micro approach to the teaching of TESOL but for a more comprehensive approach to culture in TESOL materials design.

## **6. From home culture to intercultural knowledge base: A model of presenting culture through TESOL Materials**

In relation to the comprehensive view of culture, we suggest an intercultural model in TESOL that may ease the tension about culture in TESOL materials design (see figure 1). The present researchers argue that an awareness of inter-cultural elements may be a solution to the fear of cultural imperialism. TESOL materials designers can help learners develop an intercultural communicative competence by including an awareness of both their home culture and the TL's culture. As learners become involved in learning about other cultures through the use of materials both based on their own and the target language cultures, they can compare the principles, usage and the inbuilt technical issues of other culture with their own culture within the context of language learning; and this helps them to better learn their own culture (Moss, 2002). In fact, with consciousness to cultural differences and holding positive attitude, learners can promote lenience and be considerate to others (ibid.).

As shown in the model (figure 1), in teaching English in an ESOL preliminary or beginning stage, we mainly suggest learners' home culture in TESOL materials. The authors recommend this because at this early level home culture seems to be useful in activating learners' schematic knowledge. Therefore, the new lessons with familiar topics can become interesting to them as they have prior background knowledge of the topic chosen from their own culture. However, TL's culture should not be

completely ignored here. In addition to home cultural elements, we also need to look into the possibility of the use of images and vocabulary of TL's cultures at this stage. Nonetheless, care should be taken to avoid 'overloading' the students with more complex concepts especially in the early stages as learners may feel demotivated due to their struggle both for learning a completely new language together with a TL cultural setting which most of them perhaps have never seen yet.



**Figure (1): Model of cultural adjustment in TESOL materials (The present authors' Model)**

In addition to using the home culture, the learners can be introduced to some of the elements of the TL's culture in their pre-intermediate level. At this stage, learners can be exposed to the functional aspects of the TL; here the focus is more on the forms than on the vocabularies alone. We can draw their attention to some basic ways in which the lexical phrases and chunks of the two languages operate in different cultural contexts. However, as in the previous stage, at this level the home culture is used predominantly as the basis of context in TESOL materials.

Finally, at an intermediate and advanced level it is argued here that TESOL materials should include both the home and the TL's cultural elements with an equal emphasis. At this stage we give equal importance to the TL's cultural contexts along with the home culture for two reasons: (a) ESOL learners at an intermediate or advanced level are expected to be cognitively aware and thus, they are able to compare and contrast their own culture with the TL's culture. This process of comparison and contrast will help them be more aware of their own culture. (b) additionally, the inclusion of the intercultural elements will be really useful in

creating an intercultural communicative competence in the learners and this competence will further help them in avoiding miscommunication and misunderstanding while using the TL among different nationalities. The real beauty of including both the home and TL's culture at this stage lies in the fact that the inclusion will encourage the learners to learn **more** pragmatic aspects of the TL so that they can use the language appropriately in various contexts. In other words, materials with home and TL's cultural elements will prepare the intermediate and advanced ESOL users to avoid pragmatic failures, causing pragmatic errors while using the TL. At this stage learners will be actively engaged in comparing and contrasting ways in which specific actions and behaviour in their cultures are similar or different from those in the TL culture- a process that develop pragmatically aware and interculturally competent ESOL users.

## **7. Pedagogical Implications**

With our present intercultural model, this paper has the following implications:

- More professional TESOL materials writers and developers will be required in ESOL contexts in the days to come. The need for professional materials designers implies that the local universities need to adapt their TESOL/ELT courses by making a shift from purely theory based teacher education programme to a more practice-oriented one. We also see a scope of collaboration between local universities and those in the English-speaking inner circle countries.
- In addition to professional materials writers, more specialised professional publishers will also be needed within local contexts. In this case, local publishers may establish collaboration with international publishers (e.g. Oxford University Press, Cambridge University Press, Longman, etc.). The link between local and international publishers is likely to create an even academic culture and a stronger sense of professionalism among the local publishers.
- International publishers may further their local offices and publishing press to local ESOL contexts, encouraging local materials writers. As our model implies there must be a balance between learners' home culture and TL culture, and as the Euro-centric materials practically cannot cover all the ESOL

cultures, the international publishers may encourage local materials designers by establishing their local publishing houses in ESOL contexts.

## 8. Conclusion

This paper examined the relationship that underpins a language and its culture. A language is so closely bound to its culture that we cannot separate these from each other. In language teaching, the implication is for integrating learners' home culture and TL's culture with the language contents so that learners' both linguistic and pragmatically aware communicative competencies are developed.

The argument here is that obstinately rejecting the TL's culture on the basis of the fear of cultural imperialism is in no way a good idea; it rather creates another problem that we have termed as 'cultural re-imperialism'. This paper shows a model balancing between the ESOL learners' home culture and the TL's culture. We claim that neither home culture nor the TL's culture alone is sufficient for developing what Alptekin (2002, p.57) calls 'intercultural communicative competence' in the ESOL users.

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