# CULTURE AND IDENTITY: TOWARDS REDEFINING REPRESENTATIONAL MATERIAL FOR THEESL/EFL CLASSROOM

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## ABSTRACT

*This paper is a re-examination of the concept of language awareness, text awareness and cultural awareness in the ESL/EFL classroom. It deconstructs previous assumptions (Lazar (1993), McRae (2009), Halliday (2004) of commending any representational material in the EFL/ESL classroom by arguing that though such material ignites Learners' imagination and critical abilities, it should be able to define the learner as well. In this light, the work attempts to answer the following question: what literary material for ESL/EFL classrooms? Besides the above query, the paper probes into examining how literature (the bearer of culture and identity) can serve as a catalyst to improving language skills (competence and performance) in the ESL/EFL classroom in cross cultural environment. The argument takes us into investigating the immediate environment of learners, their experiences and educational needs. It as well highlights the reasons for the adoption of a particular literature or culture-based approach to the teaching of English in foreign or second language context. The paper also suggests tasks typical of literature or culture-based models. Thus, introducing cross-cultural texts in ESL/EFL classroom (especially trans-cultural works like Adichie's (2013) Americanah) will help learners not only to ignite their imagination and cultural awareness but will make the language more accommodating and give learners the possibilities of situating and adapting themselves within the individual and global milieu. The language as such, will not be a "foreign language" or colonial tool but will pass for a defining language.*

**Keywords:** language awareness, text awareness, cultural awareness, representational material, identity, trans-cultural

## INTRODUCTION

The four-skill approach to language teaching recurrent in EFL/ESL classroom is mostly premised on referential language. Such a language, according to proponents of this school, means what it says, with established or defined grammatical and syntactic rules. McRae (2009), in examining this static approach to language teaching, purports that no living language in the world can remain only at the referential level for very long. For him, every language in use is hugely representational, and perhaps no language more so than English. This representational drive in language teaching pushes him to introduce the fifth skill (Thinking) which, according to him, can be obtained exclusively from literary texts. The literary text, as most scholars (Lazar (1993) and McRae (2009)) acclaim, involves learners and engages their emotions and cognitive faculties. They also hold that amid its educational function in the classroom, material obtained from these texts help ignite Learners' imagination and critical abilities. The aforementioned revelation are very enticing, especially as these scholars pave the way to the concepts of language awareness, text awareness and cultural awareness or what Halliday (2004: 308, 317, 322 )has previously christened - “learning language, learning through language and learning about language”. However, these captivating postulations might possibly be short-lived especially to ESL/EFL learners, who are not only out to activate their critical abilities and imaginations but are more or less out to deconstruct colonial assumptions, define themselves within the language of instruction, and situate themselves within the global milieu. In this light, one is obliged to ask the following question: what literary material for ESL/EFL classrooms? The answer to this question finds expression in the analysis. Besides responding to this question, the paper as well examines how literature (the bearer of culture and identity) can serve as a catalyst to improving language skills (competence and performance) in the ESL and EFL language classroom in cross cultural environment. The argument takes into consideration the immediate environment of learners, their experiences and educational needs. It proceeds to highlight the reasons for the adoption of a particular literature or culture-based approach to the teaching of English Language, using excerpts from transcultural texts like Adichie’s(2013) *Americanah*, which cuts across world cultures. Finally, the paper suggests possible strategies or tasks typical of literature or culture-based models to the teaching of English Language as a means of giving an identity to the learner.

Evidence within the academia and other scholarly environments has proven that culture is central in the academic performances of learners. When learners are exposed to material that is linked to their social context or culture, they hardly feel as giving up as is the case with texts that treat cultural aspects that are totally alien to them. Gikandi (2001:3), in this vein posits that

> ...reading *Things Fall Apart* brought me to the sudden realization that fiction was not merely about a set of texts which one studied for the Cambridge Overseas exam which, for my generation, had been renamed the East African Certificate of Education; on the contrary, literature was about real and familiar worlds, of culture and human experience, of politics and economics, now re-routed through a language and structure that seemed at odds with the History or Geography books we were reading at the time.

Gikandi’s(2001) postulations concord with the accommodating role that literature functions as purveyor, transmitter or modeller of language, and other aspects of human experience including identity, especially in contexts where the language is being studied as a Second Language or a Foreign Language. Just as Gikandi’s(ibid) attention is caught by the figure of the yam as a male crop among the Ibos of Nigeria, so too will the attention of learners in most Second Language and Foreign contexts be arrested by the different literary excerpts or complete literary pieces used, if these literary pieces reflect their own realities or cultural symbols. The immediate cultural or social context should not be confused with nativists’ assumptions of pure indigenous cultures or social environments as points of departure. Contrary, the cultural or social environment in this context is a reflection of hybrid milieu in which most post-colonies find themselves today. Such familiar symbols help define them better than alien images as earlier mentioned. Menard-Warwick (2009: 26) in a similar vein opines that “...identity and learning reciprocally influence other... when learners’ identities are disconnected, resistance rather learning is likely to result”. It is on this note that Adichie’s(2013)*Americanah*, which cuts across three continents, can serve as suitable material, not only for its gift of representational language, but because it provides a democratic platform for ESL/EFL learners to see the possibility of becoming *producers* and not only *consumers* of the English language. In this light, the idea of seeing the English language a colonial string becomes a bygone.

In addition, culture only makes meaning when one feels s/he is part and parcel of it. Any language classroom which excludes the learner culturally, and sometimes do not introduce defining moment is bound to fail. When reading material in the language classroom is replete with recognizable cultural symbols or student friendly symbols, the gap between generations, colonised/coloniser, unknown/ known is far and wide reduced, and a sense of belonging is introduced. Also, the feeling of frustration and alienation is reduced since the teacher and the learner are familiar with such symbols. All these do not help only in the preservation of indigenous cultures within the language taught, but makes the language classroom more accommodating. WaThiongo (1972), like Larzar (1993) and MacRae (2009),Atenkeng (2014),upholds that language carries culture and culture carries (particularly through orature and literature) the entire body of values by which we perceive ourselves and our place in the world. Thus, using reading material that integrates the people culture and expose them to other cultures, which are part and parcel of their daily lives, will obviously create more interest in English Language classrooms than struggling constantly to suffocate learners with exclusively alien symbols, which, as earlier indicated, alienate than integrate the learner.

Muriel (1978) is equally of the view that educational accomplishment and school can be made more significant and successful when teachers as well as learners understand and appreciate the richness of any literary work as far as their culture and heritage are included in the work. Though learners are from different cultural backgrounds, they are less likely to have difficulty as regards recognition and understanding of symbols from literary works drawn from works different from their own realities.. These differences can only enrich the academic experience and increase their level of personal accomplishment. Contrary to this, if they are instead exposed to a culture that is farfetched from their own realities or that cannot give a real portrait of their contemporary society, blockages may be created, hence frustration and failure. All of us, in one way or another, are products of our culture, and many of our behaviours, values, and goals are fashioned by our culture. Therefore, trying to emulate only other cultures sometimes only help alienate us from our own surroundings. A second culture should come as an additional process, and not as replacing the aboriginal culture. Thus, any language taught at distanced from the reality of a people, is bound to attain partial results, since learners may not be able to identify themselves within the mainstream activities.

Though it is necessary to be opened to other cultures, one should prepare for better performance by learning one's own cultural values and how much they diverge from those of the others. It is argued that these differences amount to a true blockage for learners. That is, no real learning can take place as long as the learner is unfamiliar with certain areas of belief in domains where the target culture diverges considerably from the home culture. This is why it is basically claimed that people are contented when harmonized with other people they already know rather than seeking out new collaborators at the cost of finding more appropriate matches. Thus, the more the gap between cultures, the more the degree of misunderstanding and misinterpretation sets in. Moreover, it is imperative to focus more on aspects of the learners' culture than those of another culture given that, at times the presence of the imported culture, which is of course the goal of the coloniser, can push learners to reject their native culture without even mastering the second well. Consequently, learners can be faced with cultural interference because the rules and values of one can clash with the other in many domains. All these can only lead to cognitive stress and eventual failure.

Helms-Lorenz et al.(2003)adds that measured differences in intellectual performance may result from differences in cultural complexity; but complexity of a culture is extremely hard to define, and what appears to be simple or complex from the point of view of one culture may appear differently from the point of view of another. This is why individuals who are unfamiliar with a culture may think about notions and problems in different ways. The outcome is that notions based on another culture which is very far from learners' realities may make accessibility to the content not only difficult for the students, but for the teachers as well. Thus, learners do better on appraisal when the material on which they are exposed to is familiar and meaningful to them. It should equally be noted that this inaccessibility is an outcome of the failure of school curriculum to effectively implement aspects students are familiar with in the literature that they are taught. Adichie's(ibid)*Americana*, therefore, though a melting point for world cultures, can successfully be used in contemporary English language classrooms to improve language skills in cross-cultural environment like Cameroon and most post-colonies. Selected excerpt from the text will not only define the world context in which the learner is concern, but will expose him/her to the New world order, which equally has its bearing on the language s/he is learning.

Looking at the language teaching objectives, which lay emphasis on the main skills (speaking, reading, writing and listening) and sub-skills (vocabulary, grammar and pronunciation), it is essential to examine the place of such literature, as mentioned above, in the teaching of the English language. From all indications, there is an inseparable marriage between literature and language and as Ezra Pound asserts in *How to Read: Part II*, "great literature is simply language charged with meaning to the utmost" (QtdLazar 1993:2). This goes in line with Savvidou's (2013) proposition that literature is language and language can indeed be literary. Thus, both are complementary, and facilitate the understanding of each other.

Though most of the characters and concepts in Adichie's(2013)*Americanah* are drawn from the Nigerian, African American and British experiences, they could represent some other persons or ideas in other parts of the world, since most of the issues treated are universal. The novel thus opens the children to the world of the American African, the African American, the African British, the African in Nigeria and the Africans in the diaspora in general with their heritage and history of violence, subjugation, exploitation, abuse and segregation. Thus, its platform of varied experiences from different continents prepares the ground for an accommodating content for EFL and ESL learners.

Besides its rich, democratic and accommodating thematic thrust, Adichie's (2013) *Americanah is* equally rich in linguistic features. It is full of opportunities for teachers to integrate the teaching of linguistic/communication styles. Using a stylistic analysis (stylistics) as such involves a close study of the linguistic features of the text in order to arrive at an understanding of how meaning is transmitted, and this can be done with the support of paralinguistic features. Some of the stylistic components that can be taught in conjunction with this novel are phonetic variants (like the different ways in which Uju is pronounced), lexical variants (like the use of the words "trunk" and "fat" in the various Englishes) and syntactic variants; different grammatical constructions for the same meaning ("I was excited about..."/" I enjoyed..."). This implies that information can be perceived, transmitted and understood in different ways depending on the relationship between the speaker/writer and the listener/reader and the context.

From the different variants mentioned above, issues of politeness, social distance, power and solidarity will crop up and this is essential in language teaching and learning. Lexical variants can also give quite the opposite stylistic message. For example, choosing "nigger" over "black/African" to refer to someone, or a Caucasian speaker, shows one's identity with whiteness and establishes social distance because the racist implications of it are contained in the speaker's superiority (power). If chosen by an African American, it shows solidarity and establishes an informal and casual mood. Unlike language which is open-ended because there is no limit to the different utterances a person can make, style is virtually a closed system. For instance, we have bounds to softness and loudness (tempo, pitch, intonation and so on). Lexical variation seems to be the most open-ended feature of style which bears the brunt of adapting rapidly to a new situation. This therefore makes it possible for style to function as a set of instructions, telling the speaker how to take whatever is being said and the hearer (students) only needs to note the markers of style for him or her to decode sentences properly. Thanks to conversational implicature, we can be offered some explicit explanations of how it is possible to mean, in some general sense, more than what is actually said - that is, more than what is literally conveyed by the conventional sense of the linguistic expressions uttered.

Cultural differences in style calls for teachers and learners to know what attributes members of a society ascribe to features of style. This is because even though there are some general markers of politeness, solidarity, power, and social distance, our internalized cues of style may not necessarily tie with those of groups with experiences, cultures or identities different from ours. Thus, knowing the proper thing to say in a given context is very important as we find in Adichie's *Americanah,* especially with characters like Ifemelu and Obinze, who are hyper-conscious of their identities vis-à-vis their surroundings. Like cultural practices, language ideologies are echoes and apparatuses that explore, reflect, threaten and acclaim social and cultural production, reproduction and representation. Even the most innocent words can evoke associations that may perhaps affect our attitude and our response to an expression which contains them.

It is also important that learners be taught how to appreciate texts intelligently. Borrowing from the Kinneavy communication triangle that classifies discourse types, one notices that Adichie's (2013)*Americanah* incorporates all discourse types as it is expressive (focuses on personal expression e.g. letters and diaries), transactional (focuses on both the reader and the message e.g. advertising and business) and poetic (focuses on form and language) Savvidou (2013), Mornah (2014). The pedagogic implication of this is that it gives the opportunity for students to be taught the various aspects of language such as vocabulary and structure (stylistics) of the different discourse forms, and at the same time, test comprehension. The length of the novel is suitable, that is, 477 pages made up of 54 chapters. This gives time to reading and classroom discussions.

Adichie(2013) equally introduces learners to new vocabulary items as we move from one setting to another. For example, within British and American settings it is easy to come across words such as "googled" "deftly", "overtype", "raunchy", " buffered", and "sheen", while in the Nigerian setting words expressions and words like " Woman wrapper", "Carry go", "Mumu", "Oga", "Chief" "Biko" "tufiakwa" "Kobo" "Sha" are recurrent. Such expressions and words do not only define ESL/EFL learners but transport them to other civilizations. In this light, students could be asked to suggest the meaning in context to some of these vocabulary items, thereby opening them to a larger world that does not exclude them.

Besides the above-mentioned, there are other strategies available to facilitate the exploitation of cross-cultural literary texts. However, some are more suitable than others, especially when we consider our objectives. Generally, learners are expected to trace the plot, story line, dramatize the story, rewrite texts in their own words, and appreciate characters, themes, setting, atmosphere, and style in relation to human experiences. This helps learners to practice the traditional main language skills via the teaching strategies and activities implemented. The approach adopted here is the Integrated Approach which borrows from the Cultural Model, the Language Model and the Personal Growth Model which focuses on communicative competence. Savvidou (2013: 45) in this light notes:

> Communicative competence is more than acquiring mastery of structure and form. It also involves the acquiring ability to interpret discourse in all its social and cultural contexts. So literature can provide a powerful pedagogic tool in Learners' linguistic development.

This therefore calls for the unconditional marriage between literature, language and culture (identity). Blumfit (1986) in his examination of this unconditional marriage decries claims that introducing learners to literary material expose them to wrong usage of English and upholds that literary language is common language with a high concentration of linguistic features like metaphors, similes, poetic lexis and unusual syntactic patterns. This high concentration of linguistic feature and unusual syntactic structures is what actually makes the language representational, given that it opens room to interpretation, requires negotiation and judgment by its receiver and contains plurality of meaning since some of the words needto be contextualized in order to obtain their real meanings. For instance, Giniki in Adichie (2013) tells Ifemelu that,

> If you see how they laughed at me in High School when I said that somebody was boning for me. Because boning here means to have sex! So I had to keep explaining that in Nigeria, its means carrying face. And can you imagine that "half-caste" is a bad word here…. (24)

He proceeds to tell Ifemelu that the word "half-caste" negatively connote biracial within the American context. The above excerpt captures the cultural web in which Adichie's(2013) characters find themselves, and at same time indirectly suggests possible ways of defining themselves in the environment in which they find themselves - accommodation and adaptation.

Below are some teaching strategies and suggestion for using Adichie's (2013) *Americanah* or excerpts of the text in the ESL/EFL Classroom. These strategies are partitioned under pre-reading strategies, while-reading strategies and post-reading strategies. For the pre-reading strategies, learners can be introduced to the theme(s) of the text when they are being made to watch, read or listen to material on the similar subject (short story, poem, song, magazine, film). A film or music video on migration/immigration, racism and identity especially those acted by Black Americans and Africans. Hollywood and Nollywood have produced quite a number of such films. This serves as a pre-reading activity and gives the learner a hint of what the text is about. It also serves as a curiosity trigger as the learners become interested in finding out more about the text. It also gives room for cross-referencing and eases the understanding of the text. Prediction activities often provide interesting lead-ins to the story. Learners can be asked to read excerpts from the novel, which mentions most of the main characters and have the learners predict the main protagonist and the relationships between characters. The teacher could also briefly describe a character and ask learners to predict what will happen to them. Ifemelu, Aunt Uju and Obinze are perfect characters for this task. This helps to improve the listening, writing and speaking skills of the learners and paves the way for the thinking skill.

While-reading strategies are those that ensure the sustenance of the reading and exploration of the text. To help learners cope with the length of the novel, the novel can be broken up into manageable portions and focus questions or language-based worksheet activities constructed to help the learners through. The teacher also needs to help the students identify key chapters or paragraphs and to apply a combination of intensive and extensive reading. For example, the section of Adichie's *Americanh* where Ifemelu's Kenyan friend gives her first lessons on race is a key portion of the text. To check the comprehension of the students, they could be asked to retell the story, sequence events (drawing a time-line), paragraphs or chapters, and even answer questions.

As for post-reading activities, role play is a strategy that can be used. Students can imagine they are a particular character and act out a sketch. The main character, Ifemelu, in Adichie’s (2013)*Americanah*goes through immense psychological trauma and struggle to find ways to cope with the tough realities of being a non- American African in the US. Students can depict the scenes that reveal the heights of her struggles or crisis on stage (for example, the scene where Ifemelu shuts herself up from the world and remains in the confines of her room) such an activity helps to develop the comprehension and speaking skills of the learner. Debates could also be used. Debates concerning the attitudes of the main characters and even some minor characters towards indigenous tradition and foreign cultures or on the question of identity and migration could be an interesting and enriching exercise that will incite the opinion of the whole class, thus rendering the text interesting and realistic especially when it is linked to the lives of the learners. Arguments can be made stronger when they are supported via cross-referencing or personal experiences. They could be asked, for example, to say who is to blame for Ifemelu’s depression or if Ifemelu and Obinze, in their attempts to assert their otherness, are biased or develop prejudices.

In order to create an atmosphere in which neither the learner nor the teacher is ill- at- ease with feelings, reactions and emotions associated with identity, the teacher should maintain objectivity towards the subject and should be ready to assume only the role of the guide and mentor in the most non authoritarian way possible rather than try to comment on every point or attempt to answer every question. Let secondary reading be the task of learners. Questions on identity and identity related issues like oppression, racism, segregation, class distinction, color, and immigration should be discussed using evidence from the text before relating it to contemporary society so as to avoid ill feelings or emotional outbursts. The teacher is expected to help learners shape their previously held opinions or remodel them if need be and just receive opinions without assimilating them at every critical level to fit their persons and experiences. It is important for the teacher to allow the students to do much of the talking so that they can air their views towards the subject no matter how silly or prejudicial they may be. The views can later be discussed in class with more attention paid to the intolerant and biased ones and the more objective ones used as examples.

Thus, introducing cross-cultural texts in ESL/EFL classroom will help learners not only to ignite their imagination and cultural awareness but will make the language more accommodating, as it helps define them, and give learners the possibilities of situating and adapting themselves within the global milieu. The language as such, will not be a “foreign language” or colonial tool but will pass for a defining language as it gives room not only for imposed or global cultural awareness but also for defining moments in class. After all, Kachru (2005:158) sums that “for readers across languages and cultures one resource for gaining familiarity with the varieties of English in the second Diaspora is the literature created in them.”

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