Promoting Cultural Neutralization: Culture Bump and How to Overcome it at English Tertiary Education in Bangladesh

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Abstract*:*

Language is one of the basic elements of any culture. To learn a language properly, it is vital to have the proper orientation of the culture that language belongs to. Due to the fact, when a learner does not find the expected behavior from the target culture or does not find any aspect of that culture "normal", he feels demotivated to learn the language. This paper attempts to explore whether, in a tertiary English classroom of Bangladesh, a teacher finds any obstacle to teach ESL/EFL and the general outlook of the learners towards Western culture. With the help of 35 ESL/EFL instructors and learners of Bangladesh, the author studies to understand their present impression on diverse culture in the classroom and to find some recommendations to achieve a culturally neutral environment for ESL/EFL education. Through an open-ended questionnaire, the participants have conveyed their assertion that, if the aspect of cultural variance is overlooked, it will have a drastic impact on the learning process or even some significant misinterpretations will occur in cross-cultural communication. Hence teacher should balance out between native and target culture and create a neutral ambiance suitable for ESL/EFL learning.

Keywords: Culture Bump, Culture, Language, ESL, EFL

In today's time, the world is becoming a global village defying the geographical boundaries, races, and differences where English has become one of the most dominant languages due to its political and imperial background. This phenomenon enables people of any culture to explore and connect with other cultures making the western ethos as a driving element among such interactions. However, during such process people may also face something called Culture Bump.

Take South Asian countries like India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, and Bangladesh as examples, English has been used here for over 250 years in both formal and everyday life. During this time, western culture is also having a great impact on their societies, dictating and introducing more new aspects from it, which are the polar opposite to their own cultures.

According to McKay(2004), when people learn English as an international language (EIL), it becomes denationalized, hence there is no need for cultural orientation to learn English. In EIL, *"the language belongs to no one culture but rather provides the basis for promoting cross-cultural understanding in an increasingly global village."* (McKay, 2004).So while

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teaching EIL, educators should create an appropriate methodology for EIL in order to *"Think globally, act locally."* (McKay, 2004).However in countries like Bangladesh, English is mostly learned as a foreign language (EFL) for professional and academic needs or for mere interest, and it is now has become an integral part of their education system. But minimal steps have been taken to minimize the culture gap between the western and Bangladeshi culture when it comes to formal EFL education. In this kind of situation, the culture of the target language, here English, must be learned concurrently with the linguistic aspects to avoid any unnecessary misconceptions about the target culture, here western culture, which may lead to misunderstanding the native speakers and demotivating the learners to learn the language. This paper has addressed the issue of Culture Bump that very frequently gets unnoticed in English learning and teaching but most of the teachers and learners have faced it in one way or another. It has attempted to find out whether the students, teachers, researchers, and other stakeholders feel the necessity to incorporate cultural knowledge in their language program or not. It also lists out some effective methods and strategies to moderate culture bumps at tertiary language teaching on the basis of the cultural differences both the teachers and the students have experienced.

Culture Bump

Culture is a consciousness that society shapes up for its people. It shapes their beliefs, values, and reason about what is the right or normal way of behavior and what is wrong. People tend to take their culture for granted as long as someone else differs from them. When a member of a particular society expects a certain way of normality from the people of other cultures in a certain situation but fails to get it, it creates a great deal of confusion in him which leads to emotional and rational reactions. This phenomenon is called Culture Bump. According to the explanation given by Archer and Nickson (2012), Culture Bump takes place when an individual has expectations of *"a particular behavior"* in a particular situation and encounters differences when interacting with people from another culture. A particular behavior refers to *"normal behavior as learned in one's own culture"* (Archer, 1991).

This kind of differences interferes between cross-culture communications. Often people are unaware of having culture bumps which simply feels like nothing else but a sense of disconnection. In some cases, even individuals with a great deal of intercultural experience, such as EFL teachers, can react to a culture bump.

Archer and Nickson (2012) have listed out two components of the impact of Culture Bump,

- The Emotional Component: Culture bumps can affect one's emotional faculty negatively, where he senses a disliking towards the cultural difference, or positively, where he likes the difference, or can stay neutral, where no strong emotion is found. It might get changed fromtime to time, situation to situation.
- The Rational Component: It is another component of Culture Bump that Archer(1996) has named a *knowledge dichotomy*. This phenomenon consists of two concurrent reactions, an immediate *"feeling of disconnectedness"*, accompanied by a sense of *"not knowing"* (Archer &Nickson, 2012).

Due to the impact,questions related to "Why?" something occurred differently emerges, and intrinsic responses are given to pacify the disconnectedness the person is feeling. However, sometimes it produces a greater sense of disconnection because the focus remains on the differences between the two cultures. They use the responses to gain knowledge about the diversity ofthe foreign culture rather than being aware of their own cultural individuality. As a result, they feel *"a strong sense of us and them"* (Archer & Nickson, 2012). Archer(1996)has termed this type of cross-cultural interactions as *Culture-bound Interactions*.

Such kinds of Interactions can caus eunintentional misconceptions about the other culture. If these prejudices can be overlooked, it gets much easier to acknowledge and accept the beauty of individual differences and evokes a sense of *Unity in Diversity*. This type of cultural awareness allows people to focus more on the common grounds both the cultures have and develop a *Culture-free Interaction*. To develop one's cultural awareness, Michael Agarhas proposed a three-tiered process in 1994: Mistake, Awareness, and Repair (as cited in Thu, 2010). At the stage of Mistake, people typically detect the difference they have with the other culture and cannot minimize the gap on their own. In the next step, they acknowledge the new way of doing things in the other culture and explore diverse solutions and alternatives to meet the issue they have faced at the first stage. Finally, at the stage of Repair, they try to cope up with the target culture.

Culture Bump vs. Culture Shock

Lots of people often use the term "Culture Bump" and "Culture Shock" synonymously. Though their impact is quite similar, they have some fundamental differences. Culture Shock is a widely known experience for a second language learner in a different cultural context which leads to a mild to moderate to extreme psychological trauma (Brown, 1986). It is one of the phases of the acculturation process that starts with a sense of utter excitement to the new environment and then after a few days, being unable to adjust with the new setting,collapses into a sense of frustration and helplessness. This phase can last a long period of time and causes the learners to remain demotivated to acculturate and learn his target language.

On the contrary, Culture Bump is the phenomenon when a person expects a "normal" behavior from people of another culture but fails to get it and faces a bizarre, confusing, and clueless situation while interacting with people of a different culture. It can happen at any time to anyone in any situation. A person does not need to leave his own cultural context to experience a culture bump. Though it has an impact of a few seconds to minutes, it can have an effect of a longer period of time. (Archer, 1986)

Culture Bump Theory

Culture Bump refers to *"A conscious strategy for deconstructing their own experience with any type of difference."*(Archer & Nickson, 2012).It allows thinking beyond the "Why" questions to initiate effective cross-cultural communications that stimulate a sense of connectednessbetween people from two different cultures. It encourages to focus more on similarities and shared point of views by a conscious and systematic analysis of the culture

bumps that helps to eliminate the sense of disconnectedness and to appreciate *Unity in Diversity*. The main aim of this theory is to instantly establish a platform for mutual exploration and commonalities on a particular topic in order to tackle cultural awkwardness more confidently and to raise awareness on their own cultural individualities through self-reflection.

This approach creates a common ground between two persons with completely different worldviews beyond their polarities, that results in a culture-free communication. Here is a diagram which shows the process of culture-free interaction (Archer & Nickson, 2012).

Culture
Bump

Trying to
connect with
the other and
adjust

Emotional and rational
impact and a culture-
bound outlook

Using
information to
analyze his own
experience

Asking "Why"
questions to ease
the discomfort

Getting culture-
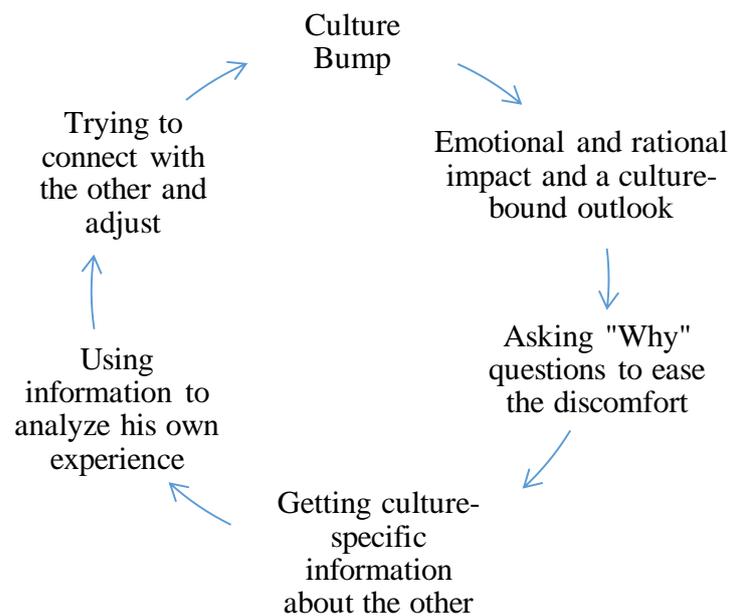specific
information
about the other

Figure 1: Diagram on the process of Culture-free Interaction

According to this figure, if a person experiences a culture bump while interacting with a person from another culture, at first he gets hit by a certain emotional and rational impact. He might feel ignorant as well as excluded from that particular cultural aspect. He feels a strong sense of anomie against the culture alien to him. He often ignores the cultural difference and remains adamant to his own way as the best. To ease his such discomfort he starts to inquire about the differences they have and gets some culture-specific responses. These information helps him to explore more about the foreign culture and to analyze his expectations and impressions along with the reasons behind them. This phase makes him realize that only cultural aspects do not define people and having cultural differences is the most "normal" thing one could expect. Subsequently, it gets easier for him to focus on developing a connection with the other that simultaneously eradicates the sense of anomie he was having. Finally, he starts to interact with the other focusing more on their commonalities and try to establish mutualunderstanding and respect for each other's differences hence develops a culture-free ambiance.

Steps of Culture Bump Theory

Archer and Nickson (2012) have suggested a more systematic process to analyze one's culture bump in order to develop cultural free interactions. The steps of the Culture Bump Theory are as follows:

- Step 1: As it is said earlier, sometimes people do not realize the culture bump they are experiencing. So at first, one has to identify the culture bump itself.

- Step 2: Then he has to describe the behavior of the person from other culture in relation to the expectations he has fixed for that particular situation.

- Step 3: After that, he has to relate his own reaction and apprehend the differences both the cultures own.

- Step 4: Next, he has to analyse how far the other person has met his expectations and compare to the contrasting impressions he has had during the event.

- Step 5: Then he has to anticipate what would be the universal situation on that particular incident.

- Step 6: Now he has to imagine what kind of behavior is the "normal" or "expected" one to do in his own culture on that universal situation.

- Step 7: He has to specify the natural human characteristics he gets to engage in when he carries out the expected behavior.

- Step 8: Finally, he has to discuss and reflect on how far people from the other culture use those characteristics while carrying out the expected behavior in their culture on that specific situation.

Objectives

On the basis of the culture bump theory, the researcher has set three objectives for her research. She has done this research in order to understand students' general outlook towards accepting cultural differences. She has also tried to identify some common culture bumps while teaching EFL. Finally she has attempted to sketch out some possible solutions to create a culturally neutral EFL classroom in Bangladeshi context.

Methodology

In line with the objectives of the study, survey research has been chosen as the research method. The researcher has selected 20 postgraduate students and 15 educators of Department of English Language and Literature, International Islamic University Chittagong (IIUC) via random sampling. She has designed an open-ended questionnaire with a few close-ended questions which was collected via Google form and typed form. The sample of the questionnaire will be attached in Appendix. The data were collected for three days (from

8 November 2018 to 11 November 2018). Then she has divided the collected data into categories according to the research goals and analyzed them qualitatively. The researcher of this paper has chosen this method in order to get a more holistic perception of the teachers and students as well as some unique opinions because it provides the opportunity to make an in-depth discussion on the data collected. Due to the qualitative nature of the survey, and the difference in statements, it is not possible to include every single detail mentioned by every participant. Hence, the overall gists of what respondents said are discussed and the common opinions of all the participants are emphasized in the study.

Findings

To explore more about the second and third research goals, at first, the researcher has asked all the participants whether they have ever experienced culture bump while teaching or studying EFL. 24% of the total participants shared that they *often* experience Culture Bump in the EFL classroom. A high number of 40% have said that they experience it *sometimes*. 18% and 20% of the participants have chosen *Never* and *Never thought of it* respectively.
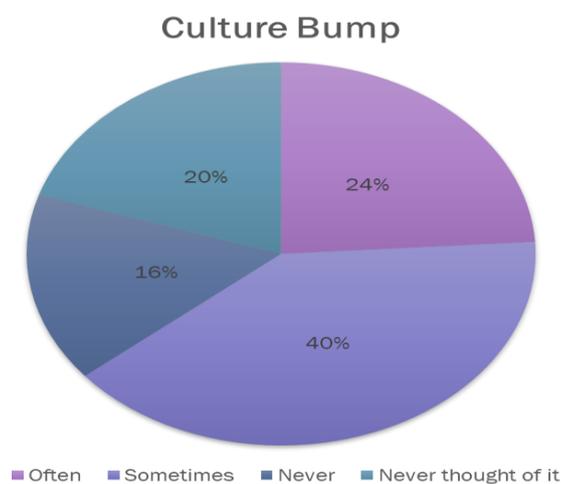

Figure 2: Frequency of experiencing Culture Bump

Based on the previous question, the researcher has asked them to share some of their experiences and possible measures they can think of to solve this issue. The significant ones are,

■ Personal Experiences: Some participants have sensed a feeling of alienation with the target culture contents. While studying materials from different cultures, they often find differences in contexts and behaviors of target culture and the one they belong to. As native language, culture, and values always pinch a person in every language learning situation, often cultural aspects differing from the native one can be hard to digest hence the learners feel disconnected. One of the most common Culture Bumps the participants have experienced is Moral Conflict. Often when teachers use western literature as the content to teach EFL, the moral messages, themes, and social values can get contradictory to the religious and moral values an individual from a particular culture has nourished all his life. A Muslim participant shared her bitter experience while she studied *Sons and Lovers* by D.H. Lawrence as a content in her EFL

classroom. She could not accept the idea of *Oedipus Complex* from beginning till the end.

Some of the participants have observed situations where people from target culture oftenact inconsiderate or worse unwelcoming towards the minorities from different culture in the classroom. They often overlook the fact that there could be a lot of behaviors from their culture of which minorities might not have any idea and might need orientation. Due to lack of cooperation minorities focus on their differences and feel inferior and demotivated to learn about the target language and culture which results a long-lasting effect. Even in some cases, region, caste and religion can cause Culture Bump in a homogeneous situation.

While teaching ESL/ EFL, teachers often faces difficulty to satisfy the needs and expectations of different students in a bicultural or multicultural setting. One of the teachers shared his experience like so, *"In a class of the post graduate level, a student from Saudi Arabia was not satisfied with my way of teaching with which the Bangladeshi students were accustomed to."*

■ Possible Measures: According to many participants, one of the first steps one can take to meet this issue is to address the issue. Often learners do not get expected outcome in learning EFL but cannot get the hands on the exact issue that causes the failure. Therefore, many participants think that by raising awareness through open communication among the teachers and the learners can minimize the obliviousness they face in Culture Bump. One of the participants has suggested, practice of understanding the cross-cultural links and discovering *"a holistic picture of relativity in diversity"* should always be encouraged in the classroom. Teachers can be great facilitators to minimize the impact of culture bump by practicing objectivity while explaining diverse aspects of target culture. To make the students oriented on a particular cultural aspect which might be alien to them, teachers can incorporate comparative studies between the target and native cultures and pinpoint the probable issues they might face beforehand. However, before doing that, a teacher should make sure to be well aware of the different aspects of target culture. One of the teachers has emphasized on the necessity of multicultural knowledge in his response. When he faced difficulties to teach multicultural students, he tried *"to study sociolinguistic and cultural behaviour of other nations, particularly my neighbouring nations and the nations from which we receive students."* Moreover, before promoting mutual understanding and cooperation among the students from different cultures, teachers should be considerate first. On the other hand, 4 of the participants have shared, there was no significant measure implied in their context and they cannot think of anything either.

To understand the general outlook of the students and teachers regarding cultural neutralization, at first they are asked about the level of acceptance they have towards cultural differences in the EFL classroom. 79% of the participants are very much welcoming towards cultural diversity in the classroom. 14% of them can accept such different concepts

sometimes and only 7% of the total participants have opined, they want their classroom to solely focus on linguistic aspects of English.
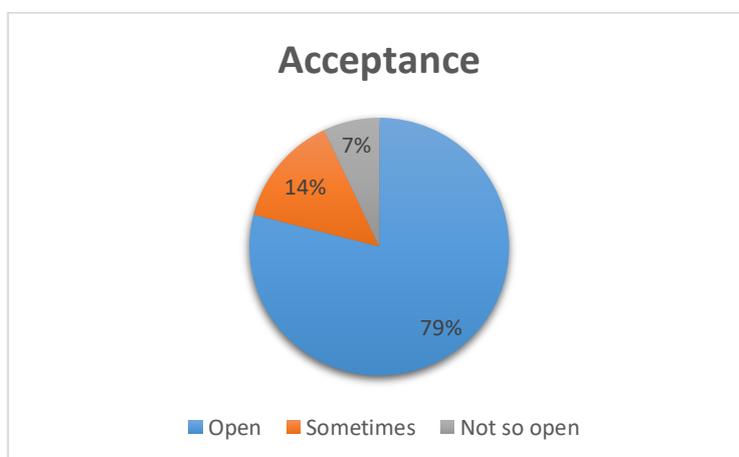

Figure 3: Acceptance of Cultural Differences in the classroom

When they are asked about their considerations regarding the necessity of Cultural Neutralization in the EFL classrooms, they have shared some underlying reasons to do so. Based on one of the six characteristics of culture, presented by Damen (1987), *"Language and culture are closely related and interactive."* the respondents have shared, *"Culture is vital element in learning any language properly."* Due to the fact, *"Without its inclusion the basic understanding of the target language will remain peripheral."* One of the participants has pointed out that, Language is taught better by contextualizing it. *"Cultural orientation can help learners understand context better."* Another participant has added, *"So that my learners does not feel awkward while going through any topics that is absurd or different from their own."* Most of the participants think that incorporating cultural orientation of the target language *"...will help to create a peaceful co-existence through mutual understanding."* One of them has expressed his concern as such, *"...otherwise, students will start to grow misconceptions and their attitude towards their TL will drastically fall and they will get demotivated to learn the language."*

Cultural Neutralization

On the basis of the data collected and analysed from the samples of Department of English Language and Literature, IIUC, Bangladesh, here are some of the recommendations for the teachers to create a culturally neutral environment in their EFL classroom.

- Both the teachers and the learners should address the issue of cultural differences beforehand and talk about it frequently. The more they talk about these, the more this issue will become easier to digest.
- Teacher should have proper orientation of the target culture and proper control over his personality biases while handling a culture bump.
- Teachers should utilize every Culture Bump as an opportunity to teach different aspects of the target culture.

- Curriculum developers can introduce additional courses that promote cultural neutralization.
- They should train students to acknowledge the uniqueness of their own cultural identity as well as the others'.
- They can use different critical comments, experts' reviews and comparative studies on the different aspects of native and target culture to provide a better understanding for the students.
- Concurrently, they should strive for developing mutual understanding and cooperation among the students as well as teachers and other stakeholders.

Conclusion

This study has tried to disclose some commonly experienced obstacles EFL learners and teachers face every now and then. It is basically instigated to know more about the perceptions both the learners and instructors have regarding cultural neutralization and to bring out some possible measures to implement it. After this brief study, it can be understood that the proper analysis of culture bumps can lead to a deeper understanding of the target culture. It helps to adjust with the academic cultural differences more easily hence initiates an effective connection between classroom interactions and target cultures. According to the statement of Archer et al. (2016), *"This connection ultimately allows students to understand the concept of cultural relativism at a conscious, personal level."* If an EFL classroom, or a language classroom in general, fails to establish the equillibrium between target culture and the native one, it will stereotype the people and behaviors of the target culture which will result communicative breakdown. As a consequence, EFL learners will feel discouraged in learning the target language and will withdraw themselves, emotionally and rationally, from the learning process.

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