

Culture and Language Education

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Abstract

There are different views on the relationship between language and culture. Some consider them as separate entities one being a code-system and the other a system of beliefs and attitudes. Some believe in a cause and effect relationship between the two; and yet others argue for a co-evolutionary mode of interrelation. This paper will subscribe to the Hallidayan co-evolutionary view of the relationship (cf. Halliday 1991), presenting the view that language and culture are both integrated into a unique socio-semiotic system always interacting with one another for the successful functioning of the system. It will discuss some aspects of this interaction and the implications for ESL/EFL education programs.

Keywords: Communicative competence, Culture, Cultural immersion, Language education, Pragmatic consciousness raising, Socio semantic system

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Introduction

It may be expected here, in a paper on ‘culture and language’, to present a comprehensive definition of the notion of ‘culture’ before anything else. But the two entities (of language and culture) are so closely integrated into one another that talking about one and attempting a definition of one in isolation from the other has never been conducive to comprehensively functional definitions. Moreover, the scholarly moves and endeavors in both fields trying to ‘patch-up’ the existing definitions for one of the entities ‘language’ or ‘culture’ to make them more compatible with the true nature of the phenomenon under study can all run the risk of repeating and resonating the attributes of the other and, as a result, being misunderstood for confusing both.

Anthropology discusses cultures ‘in terms of everyday practices that arise from normative attitudes and beliefs negotiated by particular groups whose interactions are conditioned by particular forms of social organization’ (Corbett, 2011, P. 306). For any educated common sense, the culture of a group (from a ‘family’ at the smallest scale to a ‘nation’ at a larger scale) can be characterized in terms of a set of behavioral features such as ‘attitude towards’, ‘passion for’, ‘outlook about’ and ‘knowledge about/pride in’. The following table presents a few of these behavioral features together with some examples for each:

Table 1
Cultural behavioral features and their examples

Attitudes towards	Passion for	Outlooks about	Knowledge about & pride in
Family/manners/life /health/ job/appearance/ relations/etc.	Food/sports/ life-style/etc.	Faith/politics/ education/world/ environment/etc.	Cultural products, literary heritage, Traditions / Rituals Etc.
Examples : degree of cohesion in family relation, interaction with others, meaning of life, care for health, what to wear and how , day-to-day life what and how, taboos and likes,	Examples: types of foods they love, recipes, the sport they do, their daily life time line,	Examples: beliefs, religion , care for environment , political outlooks, world outlooks,	Examples: Literary and artistic heritages, Religious rituals, national and traditional celebrations,

Groups may vary from one another in terms of these features. But this does not mean there cannot be similarities among cultural groups in terms of some of the features. It seems to be logical to argue that these features are of varying *EMIC* (distinctive) or *ETIC* (non-distinctive) properties across different group boundaries. In other words, similar to the way (in phonology) one phonetic feature may be phonemic (helping to distinguish one phoneme from another) in one language and phonetic or allophonic (varying in pronunciation but not affecting the meaning) in another, these behavioral features, when present in one group, may or may not act as a distinguishing factor between two cultural groups. One may, upon further explorations of examples and cases, arrive at some more determining factors such as 'weight of adherence' or 'consistency of occurrence among members', which will help one attempt to design a descriptive 'culturalogy' of a group, similar to what Holliday (2010) has called 'grammar of culture'.

Mode of interaction among the cultural factors is said to be complex and members of a cultural group may display different patterns of cultural behavior. Corbett (2011) argues that "...while we might conceive of members of cultures as exhibiting behavior arising from a fixed set of normative beliefs and attitudes, each culture is a dynamic entity, consisting of individuals who may resist, oppose and negotiate the norms that characterize their culture." (p. 307) Corbett (2011, p. 307) notes that "cultures are discursively constructed and always in process". It is obvious that language plays a pivotal role in this 'discursive' process. Verbal interactions are at the same time underlain and regulated by cultural knowledge. Without language and discursive interaction, cultural attitudes and orientations will not be generated and, at the same time, textual forms and verbal transactions cannot be processed in the cultural vacuum. Culture and its 'knowledge', similar to that of the language we speak, is so intuitively and sub-consciously possessed by all the members of the group that it seems to be impossible to deal with the 'culture' without implicating the 'language' and the other way round. It will, thus, be feasible to postulate that the formal skeleton of each language system assumes its communication functioning by being endowed with the musculature heart of its respective culture, together forming a unique socio-semiotic system.

For this reason, as an attempt to sort out the confusion about what can be meant by 'culture', and to offer some examples for the modes of interaction

between language and culture, this paper will try to explicate what the latest trends on language are. By looking at how various approaches to language have been evolving into more modern ones from the very antiquity up to the present day, it will try to demonstrate the dominant trend in all these evolutionary moves, which seems to aspire to widen the domain of 'language ability' by attempting to define it more in terms of a discursive process on the part of the language-user utilizing more and more aspects of socio-cultural attributes in the context of communication for handling the interpersonal verbal transactions. It will then discuss the implications of this widened definition of 'language ability' for ESL/EFL pedagogy.

What is language?

Views on what language is, and, consequently, approaches to language teaching, have changed drastically, especially in the last few decades. Traditionally, language was considered only as a set of rules, with grammar as the manifestation of such rules gaining supremacy in language teaching. At the turn of the century, the grammarians were led by Saussurean structuralism to view language as a system consisting of interrelated elements, the interrelations constituting structures. The study of language was seen as the scientific 'description' of such structures at several layers of composition of language (i.e., sound, word, phrase and sentence), 'grammar' turning into 'linguistics'. The language teachers working at the time focused their interest on 'structures' and 'patterns'; and under the influence of behaviorism as the dominant trend in psychology at that time, they considered learning of a language as something quite similar to the forming of any habit, which was defined as the result of the repetition of the Pavlov-Skinnerean chain of stimulus-response-reward. Pattern drill without any recourse to meaning was an obvious manifestation of this trend in language teaching in 1940s (cf. Rivers 1981; Crystal 1982; Frey 1968; Etmekjian 1966).

Chomsky's generativism (1957 and 1965) was an approach to language in sharp contrast to behaviorism, emphasizing the generative nature of human basic knowledge of language, i.e. 'competence', as opposed to the traditional 'prescriptivism' and structuralist 'descriptivism'. Disappointed by the achievements of the structuralists' 'pattern drill' approaches, and to avoid being accused of considering man not much different from animals, the language

teachers resorted to the Chomskyan notion of ‘competence’ for defining their goal in their language teaching programs. But scholars soon came to realize that ‘competence’ as defined by Chomsky was not the right scaffolding for language teaching operations due to the fact that it excluded ‘performance’ (socio-cultural) factors from the picture. They often tended to make a scapegoat of the Chomskyan notion of ‘competence’ without, in fact, alluding to the reality that Chomsky did never mean his framework to be used for language teaching ;and as a philosopher, he had the grand goal of characterizing what ‘man’ is and how different he is from other animals. He became interested in linguistics because he needed to develop a model to study human language using/learning ability which, he said, was the only distinguishing factor of man as a ‘speaking animal’. Chomsky’s concept of ‘competence’ was, thus, made a scapegoat of scholarly convenience for the heated discussions on the need to foreground the context and culture in language teaching, without an honest clarification that his exclusion of socio-contextual (performance) factors was not reflective of his disbelief in such factors (cf. Hymes 1972 ; Canale& Swain 1980).

Chomsky’s introduction of the notion of ‘competence’ , thus, became an unintended incentive, for the scholars from diverse disciplines--philosophy, psycholinguistics, sociolinguistics, testing--along with some new developments in some of these disciplines in the next two or three decades, to try to demonstrate how language competence was of much wider domain than that defined by Chomsky and seek to characterize the true nature of language ability: changing Chomsky’s ‘competence’ (which represented mainly the lexico-grammatical dimension of human language ability) into ‘communicative competence’ (which encompassed many socio-cultural, contextual, interactive, discorsal, and textual components), cf. Hymes (1972), Austin (1961), Grice (1975), Searle (1969), Sacks, et.al. (1974) Goffman (1972), Canale and Swain (1980), Gumperz (1982), Halliday (1991), Halliday and Hasan (1976), Wilkins (1976), Widdowson (1978), Kaplan (1966).

Some of these trends will be examined further to demonstrate how unrealistic and sometimes fuzzy the borderline between culture and language is.

The interface between language and culture

The following few are examples of the trends in the study of interpersonal verbal interactions demonstrating how the domain of what used to be called 'language' has been widening and the way the border line between language and culture is becoming more and more fuzzy.

Speech acts

Traditionally, the knowledge of verbs in a language was considered to include only the grammatical features such as time, aspect, person and voice (cf. Lyons 1981 & 1995). Any learner who had the knowledge of these features was said to possess the competence in relation with the verbs. But this picture changed when the philosopher Austin (1962) introduced the categorization of verbs in language into 'constative' and 'performative'. Austin defined constatives as verbs which can be judged to be true or false, contrary to performatives, which can only be judged to be 'felicitous' or 'infelicitous', the felicity conditions being socio-cultural in nature. Austin also defined a speech act as actions performed by production of language, not requiring any physical move. Speech acts were said to be formed by performative verbs expressed in first person simple present tense. For example, the utterance:

'I pronounce you husband and wife.'

can be considered as a speech act when used by a priest in Christian culture to marry a man and a woman. Now, to judge whether this piece of language is well-formed (acceptable), or to use Austinian term 'felicitous' or not, one needs to look at the socio-cultural features such as who the producer is, the place of production, the addressees as well as the wider context of culture. Thus the language user's knowledge of lexico-grammar and socio-culture merges into one whole entity.

Indirect speech acts

Speech acts are described to perform three simultaneous functions/acts: locutionary, illocutionary, and perlocutionary (Searle 1969).

Locutionary function is defined as what is said in the performance of a speech act (the lexico-grammatical component); illocutionary function is what is meant or intended by the speaker; and the perlocutionary function is the

effect the performance of a speech act can have on the addressee. For example, in the following speech act performed by a mother addressing her young child who does not finish up his plate at the dinner table : ‘*No pudding if the plate is not finished up*’, the locutionary component is just what is said in the statement; the illocutionary function is a ‘threat’ to cut the dessert to the person who does not finish his food; and the perlocutionary function is the effect of this on the listener : whether the child understands the threat and tries to finish up his plate. In the use of language, a direct relationship holds between the sentence form and the intended functions as presented in the following table:

Table 2
Form vs. function correlation

Sentence form	Sentence function
Statements	Inform
Imperatives	Order
Interrogatives	Ask

Any indirect relationship between form and function leads to ‘indirect speech acts’. For example, when a mother tells her child: “Don’t you have school tomorrow?”, she means to tell the child to stop watching TV and start preparing his school assignments. What is important in the performance of the indirect speech acts and contributes to their acceptability (i.e. *appropriacy*) is knowing where to use them and their degree of indirectness required for the given situation. But these conditions are not part of the lexico-grammar in language and they depend on the socio-cultural conditions under which they are used. These conditions as well as the degree of indirectness required for performing an act in a specific situation can vary across cultures; and for this reason, an indirect speech act which is quite appropriate for the language users from the same cultural background may sound inappropriate for the speakers from a different culture. As other examples of cross-cultural variations in the degree of social appropriacy of language forms, Celce-Murcia and Olshtain (2000, p.171) argue that “in some cultures age may be a significant factor in choosing certain formulaic or politeness features of address; in other cultures status or social distance may affect spoken discourse.”

Understanding the intended meaning of the indirect speech acts (implicatures) It is, of course, a part of every language user's ability to understand what is meant despite what is said in most communication situations. In other words any 'competent' language user can mostly understand the intended meaning of an indirect speech act in its context. The theory of linguistic communication should, thus, possess the capacity to account for such cases. For this purpose, a language philosopher named Grice (1975) introduced the notion of cooperative principles, according to which any participant in verbal interaction is assumed to be expected to cooperate to observe four maxims (principles): (1) Quantity (to make his/her contribution neither more nor less informative than needed), (2) Quality (not to produce non-true statements), (3) Relation (the statement produced should be relevant to the situation) and (4) Manner (What is said should be clear and non-vague). Violation of any of these four maxims by one party in the verbal interaction would be seen as a signal by the other party to try to search for the reason for such a violation in the light of the relevant factors in the context of situation, arriving at the actual intended message of the speaker, i.e. **the implicature**. It is, of course, the person's awareness of such factors which enables him/her to negotiate this intended message. Any culture-specificity of these factors can either block the implicature-making operation or lead to a message not intended by the addresser. Any of these maxims may function differently across different cultures. For example, in the case of maxim of Quantity, what may count as the right amount of information making an exchange appropriate in a specific context of situation can vary from culture to culture. As an example, for a request for direction, the respondents from different cultures may go to varying amounts of details.

Interactional competence

Language competence also includes the ability to manage oneself in dialogic and multilateral verbal interactions (cf. Sacks, et.al.1974). This ability would require the participant in interaction to be / keep aware of all dimensions of the composition of the context of situation without which his/her management strategies will certainly fail.

Studies in conversation analysis (cf. Sacks et.al. 1974; Schiffrin, 1994. Pp. 232-279); Levinson 1983, pp. 284-370) include the following among such

strategies: opening and closing turns, turn-taking, handling the adjacency pairs, keeping the floor, yielding the floor, interrupting the speaker without causing any offence, avoiding signals by others to take the floor without sounding rude, opening, transitions and closing talks, accommodating the hearers, etc. There are certainly some variations in these interaction strategies across cultures.

Text and context (ethnography of speaking)

Every text represents a context. The receiver's (reader or listener) awareness of the language-related features of the context of interaction, i.e. the ethnography of speaking/communication (Hymes, 1962) including the participants (speaker and listener), goal, genre, ... will certainly enable him/her to grasp the intended meaning. Some discourse producers (speakers/writers) offer clues towards the ethnographic description of their discourse in order to assist the addressee to get at the intended meaning by visualizing the context. But the basic requirement for this to happen is the participant's belonging to or familiarity with the same culture. In cases where the receiver belongs to a culture where the target context is not defined as it is in the host culture, it is obvious that the clues offered by the discourse producer will either be opaque and non-functional or will lead to unintended meanings.

Writing skill and culture

Written texts, apart from the fact that they represent their respective context of situation, are reflective of the thought patterns of the culture of their producers. In other words, texts representing identical contexts of situation carrying the same communicative goals may be realized in different forms in the same language across different cultures. The logical progression of a text and the way it is constructed to convey the intended purpose can be claimed to rely on concepts that are not necessarily shared across all cultures. Robert Kaplan's work in 1960s on contrastive rhetoric is driven by the premise that the rhetorical organization of a text and its progression are determined by the thought patterns of members of a particular culture. Kaplan was of view that rhetorical patterns in writing often reflect culturally determined concepts that

find other manifestations within a particular culture. Kaplan (1966) argued that the organization of expository prose is influenced by the culture of the producer. In ESL writing, it is believed that the 'preferred patterns of primary culture are demonstrably transferred into the second language' (Ostler, 2002, p. 178).

Genre, which can be defined as the conventional frames specifying what can be said and the way it should be said, is mostly a culturally determined concept. Hinkel (1999, p. 71) sees genre as "conventional frameworks in textual macro-structure" deriving from different stylistic, religious, ethical and social notions and being bound with the culture of the writer. According to Hyland (2005, p. 114) 'cultural factors help shape our background understanding, or schema knowledge, and are likely to have a considerable impact on what we write and how we organize what we write, and our responses to different communicative contexts.'

As examples, we may name the following possible cases: Personal letters from different cultures can be different in format, framework and contents. Non-native producers of academic writing from different cultures writing in English on the same topic within an identical discipline may differ from native North American or British writers in terms of whether the Aristotelian notions of persuasion and argumentation are followed or not, and the degree to which the writer retains a balanced stance of objectivity and credibility in academic writing (cf. Hinkel, 1999). Culture, thus, underlies the language users' writing competence too.

Discoursal approach to meaning

In discoursal approaches to language, text is said to carry no fixed pre-meditated meaning. Its role is rather 'indexical' in nature, i.e. it offers 'indices' as to the direction to which the discourse comprehension process can turn for clues. It is through this indexical direction and redirection that the discourse receiver's cognitive system is engaged and a comprehension process is activated so that a meaning can / may be negotiated. It is recommended that one should rather talk of 'meaning potentials' (Halliday, 1994) for any text, the potentialities becoming actualized on the basis of the specific socio-cultural factors involved. This outlook on meaning in linguistic interactions can be traced back to Bakhtin (1981), who talked about the dual dimensions of

meaning, i.e. ‘convention’ and ‘situation’ and considered the ‘dialogue between these two as the essence of language use. He talked of ‘translinguistics’: ‘the study of the dialogue between our linguistic resources (conventions) and the way in which we use them to respond to real-world circumstances (situation) (cf. Bakhtin, 1981/2010). Similar dual concepts of ‘signification’ vs. ‘value’ (the former being the conventional value of the lexicon-grammatical code and the latter the functional value they assume in the real socio-cultural domain they are situated in) have also been presented in applied linguistics (cf. Widdowson, 1978).

What is of prime interest for us here is that this negotiation is based on a host of cognitive and socio-cultural factors associated with the context and the receiver; and thus, people from different cultural backgrounds may arrive at quite different messages from the same textual elements.

Intertextual meaning and culture

One mode of the indexical function of the text just discussed above is intertextual indices accommodated in texts. Intertextual indices or functions are those which direct the receiver’s (reader/listener’s) attention beyond the boundary of the host text to the (guest) elements and images in other texts or contexts helping the processor of the text to utilize the socio-cultural resources associated with those elements for the construction of a message. Intertextual elements are abundantly found in literary texts; but this does not mean that they cannot be equally abundant in some non-literature texts. Most of the inter-textual elements employed in texts, whether literary or non-literary, can be highly culture-specific and as such cannot be processed with the receiver possessing no familiarity with the guest-culture.

As an example, in the following piece of text, taken from the CBC RADIO 1 Ottawa Morning Talk Show, film critic section, talking about the film made on Jack Layton’s (the late Federal New Democratic Party Leader, who died in an abrupt ailment right after his party’s landslide victory to the Official Opposition Status in the Canadian federal elections) life, describing the Toronto audience’s reaction to the film:

“There was lots of **kleenex** brought out!”

Here, the element ‘kleenex’ is indexical as a tissue paper brand name.

Also the following example in an exchange between the travel agent and a tourist booking flights to Rome for the new Pope's selection process by the Catholic Cardinals in Vatican:

Travel agent: When do you want to return?

Tourist: "Not until the **white smoke**, of course!"

This interaction will naturally retain its opacity for those not familiar with the culture of the new papal selection procedure, where the results of deliberations for selecting the new Pope are symbolically announced by black or white smoke released through a chimney in the central square in Vatican.

Are culture and language different phenomena?

Language and culture are so integrated into one another that any disregard of the latter in discussing any aspect of the former leads to an awkward anomaly in discussion. Culture is like the heart for the organism of language; and the life and functioning of this whole entity can be described and discussed only by considering the whole system with all its component parts in interaction with another. This integrative and systemic approach to the 'socio-semiotic entity of verbal interaction' assumes even more significance when discussing issues relating to language education. To use an analogy, in describing the structure of an organ in human organism, the anatomist can be justified to go into details of structural and anatomical details; but using these descriptions, a surgeon can never consider and use them in the surgical operating theatre detached from the patient's heart condition and many other factors. Likewise, one may, as a descriptive linguist, choose to focus on the morphological or syntactic descriptions of a language code; but as language teachers and planners for language education programs (similar to the surgeon in the above analogy) one cannot specify the teaching and educational goals without considering the functioning totality of the 'language body'. If they did, their attempt would yield no fruit because their original outlook would be fraught with basic misconceptions about the nature of the object of their study. It has, indeed, been due to such misconceptions that we have been witnessing considerable scale of 'evolutionary' trends in ESL/EFL studies literature, each new trend suggesting to have complemented the one before while at the same time admitting the need for further developments to be more effective, as discussed above.

But what is this ‘heart’ of culture, one may ask? What is ‘language’? Are they the same phenomena? Among a host of definitions given to culture I find the following very consistent with the above discussions: Culture is as a “historically transmitted semiotic network constructed by humans’ allowing them ‘to develop, communicate and perpetuate their knowledge, beliefs and attitudes about the world’ (Geertz (1973, p.89). Thus, the applied linguists and ESL/EFL educationalists may rather talk of the socio-semiotic system or network consisting of culture as the central pulse-making machinery, the code systems, the verbal code-system (i.e. language) being one among them. Otherwise, considering the code-systems per se would be an obvious misappropriation of the target and any attempt along such lines would, thus, be doomed to failure.

Cultural tendencies mirrored in the lexico-grammar of a language

A topic which may be expected to be discussed when discussions on the relationship between culture and language are underway can be the way the (lexico-grammatical) structure of different languages may be reflective of the cultures mostly associated with them. Such discussions can hardly be relevant to our discussions in the present paper where we are mainly concerned with culture and language pedagogy. Nevertheless, a few examples of such relationships can be illuminating here .

For this purpose, we use Saussure’s (1916) notion of binary distinction between ‘form’ and ‘substance’. According to Saussurean Structuralism, every language is considered as a unique system, and as such, languages would share the same grammar, sound and meaning substances; while each language might give different forms to the same shared substance. For the difference in the lexical form of the same meaning substance across languages, we may name the following examples : the meaning substance of ‘snow’ may have one or two forms in English but many different forms in Eskimo languages; only one word is used to refer to the meaning substance ‘camel’ in English where a few different forms are used to the same animal in Arabic; only one word ‘cousin’ is used in English to lexicalize a bunch of kinship relationships whereas eight different forms are used in other languages (like Persian) for the same purpose; only one word is used in

English to refer to the mother's or father's brother (uncle) but in some other languages (like Persian) two different lexical forms are employed for this purpose.

Lexical forms can also be shown to vary in terms of the mental images (mental lexicon) they represent. For example, to refer to for the same object which, in English language, they use 'pressure cooker' (representing the mental image of 'cooking under pressure'), in Persian, they use a form which represents the mental image of 'fast cooking' and in Turkish, they use a form which represents the mental image of 'a saucepan with whistle'.

For the differences in the form of the same grammar substance, we can name the following examples: gender in English and French (objects being considered either masculine or feminine in French but neutral in English); second person pronouns in French and English ('you' being used for both singular and plural second person in English while 'tu' and 'vous' being used for singular and plural second persons respectively in French).

All such differences can be argued to be reflective of cultural differences.

Implications for second language / culture education

Having presented a brief discussion of the true nature of the relationship between language and culture, and having seen how these two are highly integrated towards a unified socio-semiotic system which accounts for the everyday interpersonal verbal transactions, we will now focus on the implications of this perspective for Second language (L2) and second culture (C2) pedagogy / education.

Following the distinctions made in 1970s between 'acquisition' and 'learning', the former being applied to the first language or mother tongue (L1), which involves no teaching, happens in real-life situation and focuses on meaning, and the latter being used in connection with a second language (L2), which involves teaching, with conscious attention to language rules, and happens in classroom, and with due attention to the real nature of language knowledge, being 'procedural' which cannot be taught and should rather be picked up by the person under certain conditions, the applied linguists engaged in ESL/EFL education started talking of Second Language Acquisition (SLA) ideas, suggesting that second language education programs should be carried out in almost the same manner as the first

language acquisition processes. These SLA advocates argued that acquisition-like processes can be created in SL classes, through designing real-life-like communication tasks for the learners to perform, and focusing on meaning and communication through which they can pick up the language. But they also suggested that some 'focus-on-form' activities, unlike the child L1 acquisition process, would be allowed in SLA classes in order to assist the SL clients to achieve faster and more smooth mastering of the language (cf. Krashen & Terrell, 1983). The teacher's job was defined to be mainly a matter of designing 'focus-on-meaning' tasks to engage the learners in performing 'real-life like' communication activities, and also occasionally, planning to introduce some 'focus-on-form' (grammar) tasks to help and assist the learners 'to notice' (cf. Schmidt 1990, 1993 & 2001) a target structural item (form), whenever required.

Following these trends in SLA, the ESL/EFL education advocates who wanted not to neglect the target culture in the language education programs, tended to apply the SLA approaches to the second culture and talked of second culture acquisition/SCA (rather than second culture teaching) arguing that, like language, the second/target culture cannot be taught and it should be acquired by the learner. For this to happen, similar to SLA activities, the learner needs to be 'immersed' in the target culture, focusing on meaning while being offered some 'focus-on-form' support when required. Rose (1999) uses 'pragmatic consciousness raising' to refer to such 'focus-on-form' activities in second culture acquisition process. This may be argued to be impossible in EFL situations where live target language and culture contexts are rare to find. For such cases, the EFL teachers and materials developers may choose to use authentic materials as well as the target language literary resources such as modern short stories and plays where the live contexts allow for cultural immersion raising the learner's awareness about the target culture.

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Biodata

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