THE PREMISE OF CULTURAL ISSUES IN THE ESL/EFL CLASSROOM

Throughout our lives we are constantly moving through different discourse systems (settings where we interact with others: in our family, at our place of worship, at work, with our friends). In those different discourse systems, we adjust (at least slightly) our values, beliefs, practices, and behaviors to fit in and be accepted. According to Scollon and Scollon (2001), "cultures" are discourse systems defined specifically on a national or ethnic level.

One enters a classroom to be socialized into a new discourse system.

Our job as TESOL instructors is to provide our learners with the knowledge and practice that will allow them to succeed as members of their target discourse system (which will be some English variety speech community). Therefore, we cannot be satisfied to teach English only, we must also teach our learners how they can be seen as genuine members of the discourse system that they wish to enter (when they choose to access those elements of their cultural repertoire).

To do so, we must know the discourse systems that our learners are currently participating in and the discourse system they seek to enter, so we can help them see how the new discourse system relates to discourse systems they know.

Especially if we are teaching learners about a discourse system that is academic, we refer to the knowledge of the conventions and practices of the discourse system as 'literacy" (NB: thus, in a discourse approach, "literacy" is not just the decoding or encoding of words on a page, but the ability to succeed in all school practices).

Scollon and Scollon describe the general discourse system of "Western" culture as the Utilitarian Discourse System. This discourse system is broad enough to describe the general discourse system of international business and the discourse system of public schools in the United States. Thus, it is often our role to help students understand and participate in some particular sub-system of the Utilitarian Discourse System.

However, no discourse system is monolithic—all tolerate certain variations but reject others. Therefore our jobs as TESOL instructors is not only to socialize learners into their target discourse system, but to help them explore the variances permitted by that discourse system so that they can be seen as members of the target discourse and still be themselves to the greatest extent possible.

This can be done by structuring the culture of our classrooms to be “third places” where students can neutrally explore both their home cultures and their target culture, and thus determine their individual relationship (i.e., their unique identity) to both.