



# POP CULTURE



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**Pop Culture and ESL Students: Intertextuality, Identity, and Participation in Classroom Discussions (Duff, 2002)**

**KEY POINTS:** Our imagined communities include pop-culture: current events and fictional characters from television, movies and music. A student's origins may influence the kinds of pop-culture they consume, whether it be a local rock radio station, or their favorite K-pop band. A shared cultural repertoire allows students to relate to their peers and participate fully in class. Conversely, a lack of common cultural ground could prevent entry into mainstream classroom discussion.

Duff explores the implications of this for newcomer students in Canadian schools. Her paper focuses on her observations of a Grade 10 classroom where Canadian-born children outnumbered ESL students seven to seventeen. She showed that pop-culture references often permeated the classroom discussion about current events, with the Canadian students and the teacher, Mr. Jones, switching fluidly between topics while the ESL students remained disengaged and rarely participated. Although Mr. Jones assumed their silence was a choice, Duff argues that the ESL students were effectively barred from the conversation by their inability to participate and their desire not to be humiliated or singled-out.



Pop-culture can be a rich and powerful resource in the classroom, but teachers need to be sensitive to their language learners and their background knowledge. When mainstream teachers work with ELL students, they need to be cognitive of their discourse practices, and be willing to pause and explain connections made to media. Duff also suggests devoting attention to media literacy, possibly by conducting a survey at the beginning of the year to find out students' levels of media literacy and the media sources they are accessing. In this way, Duff hopes to make classrooms more inclusive for ELLs.



**Reflections and Connections:**

- I. We believe that Duff successfully brings to light a challenge for second-language learners in mainstream classrooms which teachers like Mr. Jones may not be aware of, or may not be doing enough to mitigate.
- II. In addition to Duff's recommendations, teachers can also help ESL learners by making pop-culture discussion more intentional rather than off-the-cuff, thereby allowing students, both locals and newcomers, time to prepare for the lesson.
- III. We found that Duff emphasizes the L1-L2 speaker dichotomy and the inability of newcomers to engage in the pop-culture of locals. In light of our recent articles on

multicompetence and global citizenship, perhaps we ought to view students as belonging to a global community and put more emphasis on sharing and exploring each others' cultures.

- For example, at Patricia's school, there are several Korean students. The Canadian students they have befriended love K-pop. They can make a connection, not around North American pop-culture, but around Korean pop-culture. This opens the door for sharing, and it makes us aware that these "imagined communities" that evolve from pop-culture are not limited to North American pop-culture.

IV. Duff seems to suggest that if only the ESL students knew who Ally McBeal was, they could participate in class discussion. It may not be so simple, for our cultural references are based on a range of shared cultural experiences and assumptions, and getting one's footing amid this new territory requires not only knowledge, but also a feeling of inclusion and a comfort-level among one's peers. Raising the awareness of educators like Mr. Jones and adjusting class activities around media is a good first step to making classrooms more inclusive. Teachers can also actively work toward building a comfortable rapport in the classroom and increasing opportunities for students to engage, to share, and to discover common interests in a global world.



**KEY POINTS:** This paper looks at the conversation around teaching culture in a second-language classroom, a conversation that began with **Courchêne's** article "Teaching Culture: Teacher Preparation" about teaching Canadian culture to newcomers. Courchêne's **delivery mode** is a more traditional information-transfer approach which assumes that the broad topic of culture is finite and simple enough to be transmitted top-down to the students by the teacher, who is in possession of the correct answers. **Walsh-Marr** and the other writers she cites tend to disagree with this "normative and paternalistic" (2011) method.

**Sauvé** proposes the **process curricula**, a more equitable and dynamic process which allows both teachers and learners to develop critical thinking skills with each contexts they study where cultural acts happen. Students are participants in analyzing and engaging with Canadian culture and their role within it. This is important in terms of allowing the learners to maintain their identities and reflect on how they can fit into a new country.

**Atkinson** argues that cultures are not pure and monolithic, rather they are evolving, "constantly recombining in new and unpredictable ways" (p. 633). Internal and external forces reshape cultures from inside out. This **middle-ground** approach to culture recognizes the relationship between what people believe, do, and witness in their cultural ways of being. It also reduces the risk of "othering" or making "wrong" new participants to a culture, while it allows for various forms.



Cartoon: Ron Tandberg  
*Keeping up the Conversation on Culture: A Response to Robert Courchêne & Others (Walsh-Marr, 2011)*

**Ilieva** is of the opinion that instead of learning "cultural content," students should acquire a **tool** that serves as a process of learning culture and its implications in various contexts. They explore their own (C1) perceptions of the target culture (C2) before they seek evidence of it, before any "field work" is done. This enables students to better negotiate the meaning of actions in various contexts and it empowers them as active participants who "live effectively in a community" (p. 3). The teacher is no longer seen as a detached expert in Canadian culture, rather a participant who negotiates meaning alongside the learners. Like Sauvé, **Walsh-Marr** advocates a **cross-cultural** approach, which is a discovery-based and collaborative method of teaching culture in the classroom. Students "learn about Canadian culture by observing and discussing their observations of cultural acts for themselves" (p. 116) as well as predicting the meaning and value-judgments behind observed behaviours. **Walsh-Marr**

admits that "there is a need for materials that guide teachers and learners in exploring culture together" (p.119), concluding that "we need to embrace the opportunity that ambiguity provides and to open ourselves to the inevitable shifts in culture and content in the classroom" (p.119).

### Reflections & Connections:

- I. We agree with Walsh-Marr that culture is a complex and layered topic. Therefore, to assume that there are easily identifiable behaviours and values to pass along is problematic. Lessons about culture in the classroom should be active thought-provoking conversations rather than dry instruction and dull dictations.
- II. Teaching culture in a more dynamic rather than passive way is highly beneficial. Allowing the students to share their cultures not only empowers them, it also allows them to affirm their identities and it reinforces acceptance of multiple ways of being.
- III. We feel that students relate better to the teacher as a facilitator and learner himself/ herself as opposed to the "know-it-all" detached expert who passes down knowledge. Therefore, it is essential that the "unequal power relationships" (Pennycook, 1989) between students and teacher become equal.
- IV. We concur with the importance of bringing authentic and re-worked materials to class in order to meet the students' level, needs and interests; something we worked on in our previous class, "ESL Materials Development." We also think that more open-ended materials about Canadian culture are needed, materials which teachers can adapt or extend; otherwise instructors will have a difficult time putting these theories around cultural instruction into practice.