

# Culture and language learning through short stories

**Nagamani, B**

Geetanjali College of Engineering & Technology, Cheeryala, Keesara, Hyderabad



## **ABSTRACT**

*Socio-linguists and anthropologists have for long recognized that language, its form and use echo cultural values of the society in which the language is spoken. According to Krasner, linguistic competence alone is not enough for learners of a language to be competent in that language. It is here that culture occupies an important place. For effective communication, the language used must be related with culturally appropriate behavior. Culture differs from society to society and these cultural variables should be brought to the notice of the students and explained clearly to make learning English a satisfying and complete process. Language teaching should also focus on teaching culture. Culture plays a vital role in language teaching because some words in the foreign language refer to specific meanings in a particular society, which may not be understood by the members of other cultures unless the cultural context is explained.*

**Key words:** Culture, Cultural Variables, Communication

## **Introduction**

Teaching language through culture is an interesting approach, to cultivate zeal and enthusiasm among the learners. To achieve this objective, a short story which has more cultural components of the U.S. culture is considered. The story is culturally interpreted and the exercises that follow the lesson are designed to make the learners understand the culture as described in the story. The main reason for selecting short stories is to ensure that the story is completed in less than three class periods, so that the learners do not lose their interest. The exercises are also designed with great care to improve the learners'

cognitive abilities while learning English as a second language. The widely read short story 'The Gift of the Magi' by O. Henry is selected for cultural interpretation.

The teacher uses questions that either talk about the main theme of the story or about the main character in the story as part of warm-up. Next, the students are made aware of the author, his writings and his major achievements. If there is any background information which has to be shared with the students, the teacher shares the information, to familiarize them with all the details of the author and the background to the story. The students are familiarized why the lesson is taught to them, and what

important things they need to understand. These are clearly explained in the objectives section.

Difficult words in the text are given under the section titled 'Glossary'. A case study is introduced after the lesson as part of the exercise. In this case study, the present short story has to be compared and contrasted with another short story written by a different author, who belongs to a different country and culture. This will enable the students not only to read another short story, but also to find out the cultural differences that crop up in the stories.

To analyze the learners' understanding abilities of the story, a few short answer questions are prepared. These questions revolve purely around the short story, major characters, plot and storytelling techniques used by the author. The learners' ability to understand the culture as described in the story is tested. Questions revolve around the cultural component as highlighted in the story. Though the questions are included to test the written skills of the learners, the teacher can utilize the same questions to improve their speaking abilities as well.

A separate speaking assignment is also created. This focuses on the main character and/or the main theme of the story. This speaking assignment is created with a major premise that language learning should be continuous and it should not be restricted to the classroom. Thus, the speaking activity involves not only the students, but also their family members and neighbours. Reading comprehension of the students is also

tested. An interesting or an important paragraph that has adequate examples of culture, as reflected in the story, is preferred to other paragraphs and questions are framed accordingly. An assignment that closely contemplates the lesson is given. Finally, snippets of the culture highlighted in the story are also provided for students to understand the story better. This will also facilitate them to know more about a particular culture, be it target culture or their own culture.

Culture is considered as a fifth skill, a hidden component in any language class. This kind of cultural interpretation of the story gives the learners better practice in all the four language skills, and also the hidden component in any language class that is culture. A sample cultural interpretation of the story 'The Gift of the Magi' is given to reinforce and highlight the role of culture in English language learning.

### **Teaching Procedure**

#### **Warm-up**

1. Recollect the best gift you have ever received. Think about it and speak to the class.
2. Imagine a situation when you want to give a gift to your beloved person (mother, father, husband, and friend) but you don't have money. What do you do?
3. How is Christmas celebrated in your country?

## About the Author

**William Sydney Porter** (1862-1910), popular with his pseudonym O. Henry, is an American short-story writer. His works are known for ironic plots and unexpected twists at the end. His famous stories, such as 'The Gift of the Magi,' 'The Furnished Room,' and 'The Ransom of Red Chief,' are simple in plot but make effective use of contradictory coincidences to create ironic endings. He produced ten collections of stories like 'Cabbages and Kings' (1904); 'The Four Million' (1906); 'Heart of the West' (1907); 'The Trimmed Lamp' (1907); 'The Gentle Grafter' (1908); 'The Voice of the City' (1908); 'Options' (1909); 'Roads of Destiny' (1909); 'Whirligigs' (1910), and 'Strictly Business' (1910) in less than a decade. The collections 'Sixes and Sevens' (1911), 'Rolling Stones' (1912), and 'Waifs and Strays' (1917) were published posthumously. In the year 1919 the Society of Arts and Sciences founded O. Henry Memorial Awards for the best American short stories published each year. O. Henry published over 500 short stories in many widely read periodicals and became one of the most popular writers in America.

## Objectives

- To make the learners understand gift-giving as an important custom in some cultures
- To emphasize the element of sacrifice in the story
- To make them understand that food is

an important part of culture

## Glossary:

**imputation:** an accusation, charge

**parsimony:** thriftiness, frugality

**instigates:** incites, urges on

**predominating:** prevalent; having more power

**mendicancy:** poverty (mendicant lives by asking people for food and money)

**vestibule:** an entryway

**appertaining:** relating to; or belonging to

**longitudinal:** in vertical measurements

**depreciate:** to devalue, cheapen

**job:** a chain connected to a pocket watch

**meretricious:** showy, flashy, seeming attractive

**laboriously:** with much effort and time

**assertion:** a statement, claim

**ecstatic:** overjoyed, elated

**coveted:** desired, wanted

**ardent:** eager, passionate

**janitor:** A person employed as a caretaker of a building

## Case Study

Compare and contrast 'The Gift of Magi' with

Arun Joshi's 'Only American in our village'.

### Questions

1. How much does Jim earn per week? How does Della manage to save the \$1.87 to buy the gift?
2. What is her new plan by which she would have enough money to buy Jim a grand gift?
3. How much does the hair dresser offer for her tresses? What does she want to buy for Jim?
4. What does Jim buy for Della on Christmas and how does he manage to buy the same?
5. Who are the Magi? What cultural implications do you understand through the Magi?
6. Why does the author call Jim and Della "two foolish children"? Why are they later said to have been the wisest of those who exchange gifts?
7. What is your opinion about Jim and Della's relationship?

### Self-Study Assignment: Writing

1. Find out the words and situations from the text that highlight American culture.
2. Is giving gifts an important part of your culture? Apart from birthdays and special occasions, do you give gifts for any festival in your culture? On what festival days do you offer gifts? Explain.

### Speaking

1. "Sacrificing your happiness for the happiness of the one you love is by far the truest type of love." (Anonymous) Justify with reference to the story.
2. Recollect a situation when you purchased a gift for your near or dear ones. What are the various aspects you looked at before selecting the gift? Share your thoughts with your classmates.

### Reading Comprehension

Coney Island, the "playground of the world" since 1800s, has played different roles in the lives and imagination of the world. It played a significant role especially in the lives of New Yorkers. As a quiet town by the sea side, it flourished in the early 1800s. Entrepreneurs flooded to Coney Island to reap their fortunes. The area prospered with the glory of Luna Park, Dreamland and Steeplechase Park, but with the Great Depression the Island collapsed as a castle of cards. The entire island transformed into a "Nickel Empire", a cheap amusement park. The amusement parks that prospered struggled for existence and Coney Island became the victim of the worst economic conditions and time.

Coney Island is a small peninsula that hangs from the southern edge of Brooklyn. It is very convenient to reach the place from different parts of the city. The area spreads from West 8th to West 24th Street and from Surf Avenue to the Atlantic Ocean. Besides the amusement parks and rides, the area has a three-mile beachfront walk, the New

York Aquarium and Key Span Park (which is considered to be the home of the Brooklyn Cyclone's minor league baseball team). Asser Levy Park and an amphitheatre are also present in the Island.

### **Answer the following questions**

1. Where is Coney Island?
2. What is Coney Island?
3. What are the other two names for Coney Island?
4. Write the names of the different parks situated in the Coney Island.
5. What transformed the Coney Island?

### **Assignment**

1. Who is Santa Claus? What is his significance in Christmas?
2. Collect information on why and how Easter is celebrated in different countries.
3. What are the important symbols of Easter and what do they signify?

### **Snippets of American culture**

#### **USA Gifting Culture**

The traditional US holiday season is also considered to be the gifting season. The season begins with Thanksgiving on the fourth Thursday of November every year. They thank the Lord for gracing them with abundant harvest. This holiday season begins with Thanksgiving and moves on to

Christmas and ends with New Year Eve. But now this season of tradition and culture has extended to the St .Valentine's Day as well. Presenting gifts to family, friends and business associates during holiday season is a part of American culture.

### **Conclusion**

Thus language and culture are interdependent and interrelated. One cannot exist without the other. Incorporating culture in language learning brings a new dimension in the teaching of English as a second language.

### **Notes**

Queen of Sheba; King Solomon – In the Old Testament, the wealthy Queen of Sheba, who ruled an ancient kingdom in the region of modern-day Ethiopia, visited the equally wealthy King Solomon of Israel in order to test his wisdom. When the King answered her questions, she was so impressed with his wisdom that she showered him with gold and jewels. He, in turn, granted her everything she desired.

“The magi brought valuable gifts...” – The magi (the “Three Wise Men” in the Bible) paid homage to baby Jesus by bringing gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh.

**frankincense:** a substance that is burnt to give a pleasant smell, especially during religious ceremonies

**myrrh:** a sticky substance with a sweet smell that comes from trees and is used to make perfume.

## References

Brooks, N. (1986). Culture in the classroom. In J. M. Valdes (ed.), *Culture bound: Bridging the culture gap in language teaching*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 123-128.

Casson, W. Ronald. *Language, culture and cognition*. New York: Macmillan Publishing Co. Inc.

Eagleton, T. (2000). *The idea of culture*. Oxford: Blackwell.

<http://www.places.co.za/html/visualfind.html>

<http://www.vanalen.org/competitions/ConeyIsland/background.htm>

<http://thinkexist.com/quotations/sacrifice/>

<http://www.enotes.com/gift-magi-text/the-gift-of-the-magi#prestwick-gloss-bes-29>

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Geography\\_of\\_the\\_United\\_States](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Geography_of_the_United_States)

<http://linguistics.byu.edu/resources/lp/lpc3.html>

<http://www.vanalen.org/competitions/ConeyIsland/background.htm>

<http://www.giftsnideas.com/gifts/usa-gifting-culture>

<http://oald8.oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com/>

## ELTAI MEMBERSHIP

Membership is open to all teachers of English (whether working or retired), research scholars/students as well as educational institutions. There are three categories of membership offered – Annual, Short-term (3 years) and Donor (10 years). Subscription rates are as follows:

### Individuals

Annual	:	Rs. 300/-
Short-term (3 years)	:	Rs. 750/-
Donor (Ten years)	:	Rs. 2,500/-

### Students & Research Scholars

Annual	:	Rs. 200/-
Short-term	:	Rs. 500/-

### Institutions

Annual	:	Rs. 400/-
Short-term (3 years)	:	Rs. 1,000/-
Donor (Ten years)	:	Rs. 3,000/-

Apply giving full details of your address for communication.

**Mode of Payment:** Demand Draft / Local Cheque / Cheque payable at par at Chennai should be taken in favour of ELTAI.

**NOTE:** Outstation cheques and Money Orders will not be accepted.