

# Integrating Indigenous Cultures into English Language Teaching

One of the most important components of a culture is its language. With language, people not only expeditiously communicate; they also express their values, beliefs, and world views. When a language becomes extinct, a part of the cultural patrimony of humanity is lost. For linguists, this also means the loss of an opportunity for a better understanding of the manifestation of the human faculty of language (Sánchez 2008). Language, like grasses on the plains during a wildfire, is only one component of the grass plants; culture—the roots—can survive the loss of the burned top grass. In this article, the authors discuss the preservation of cultures through English language teaching and provide practical teaching ideas in which English as a foreign language (EFL) teachers can integrate indigenous artifacts and cultural components into their classes.

While more attention is being paid these days to the importance of indigenous cultural issues and concepts, including some integration into curricula, in countries such as the United

States, New Zealand, and Australia (Joseph, Winzer and Pollard 2006), more work needs to be done. Having lived and worked overseas over 20 years, the authors have discovered that most EFL programs use curricula from English-dominant countries such as the United Kingdom, the United States, and Australia. As many countries, such as Mexico, Ecuador, and Peru, have started to address indigenous student issues in their educational reform (Morrow and Torres 2007), for the most part, these movements do not include EFL curricula. That is unfortunate because integrating local indigenous culture into English language learning not only educates learners about indigenous people in their own countries and throughout the world; it also makes learning English more relevant for indigenous students in those classrooms.

## Status of indigenous languages

“Of the estimated 7,000 languages spoken in the world today, linguists say, nearly half are in danger of extinction and likely to

disappear in this century. In fact, one falls out of use about every two weeks.” (Wilford 2007, 1)

When a language is lost, a part of culture is lost as well. An *Economist* article (May 3, 2008) on cave paintings in Africa reminded readers that little is known today about pre-colonial African cultures; some of them became extinct, along with their languages and beliefs, even before they were named. In the Americas, it is believed that when the Europeans arrived, approximately 1500 languages and dialects were spoken. Today, approximately 750 have survived, and some of them are at risk of extinction (Sánchez 2008).

In Latin America today, Colombia is among the most diverse linguistically. Sixty-five languages belonging to 18 different families are spoken. In Peru, 66 languages belonging to 12 families are spoken. In Mexico, more than 50 languages belonging to ten families have survived and are spoken today. In Chile, 11 indigenous languages are known to have been spoken, but only three remain today. Thirty-six languages are spoken in Bolivia, 31 in Venezuela, and 150 or more in Brazil (Sánchez 2008). Of the 65 indigenous languages spoken in Colombia, 38 have been studied at the Colombian Center for Aboriginal Language Studies at the University of the Andes.

Several of the traditional national universities of Latin America—including San Marcos in Peru, San Andrés in Bolivia, the University of Buenos Aires in Argentina, and the National Autonomous University of Mexico, among others—have Indigenous Language departments or sections devoted to this topic in their linguistics or anthropology departments. In Europe, the study of American indigenous languages and cultures is being studied at the Latin America Institute at the Free University of Berlin and the Department of Indigenous Languages and Cultures at the University of Leyden in Holland (Sánchez 2008).

Since the “Hawaiian Renaissance” of the 1970s, Hawaiian has begun to regain its status as a living language. The University of Hawai‘i at Mānoa recently established the School of Hawaiian Knowledge at which faculty, students, and alumni, in collaboration with native speakers of Hawaiian, are working to revitalize Hawaiian language, culture, and

literature (<http://manoa.hawaii.edu/hshk>). All of this is good news for English language teachers and students as it means that a wealth of indigenous cultural artifacts and cultural components are available for use in their classes, even though language may be at risk of extinction.

As a general overview, an English learning unit that integrates indigenous cultural components—such as dress, food, authentic artifacts, music, dance, and film—will likely include opportunities for participants to share their experiences, in terms of culture and content, and to participate in cooperative learning tasks. Specific cultures can be explored, and several models of bilingual or trilingual (i.e., Spanish, English, and an indigenous language) educational activities can ultimately help students to improve their proficiency in English.

### **Practical applications**

How do EFL teachers integrate indigenous culture into their teaching? Ideas for specific lessons appear below. Each lesson has a component for basic English, advanced English, and discussion questions or activities that address cultural sustainability. Cultural sustainability, the ability to keep a specific culture “alive” when that culture is in danger of extinction due to assimilation into dominant cultures, is important to teachers, especially those who teach indigenous students or teach in countries with indigenous populations. The questions provided are for both indigenous and non-indigenous students; just asking these questions indicates to all students the importance of learning about and preserving cultures throughout the world.

### **Maori tattoos (New Zealand)**

The art of Maori tattooing, or Ta Moko, probably came from Eastern Polynesia. There is a myth about how this tattooing began:

There once was a young man, Mataora (“Face of Vitality”) who was in love with a princess, Niwareka, from the underworld. When Mataora beat her, Niwareka ran away, returning to her father’s land of Uetonga. Mataora was heartbroken and set out to find Niwareka. Mataora had many trials and adventures on his way to Uetonga so that when he

arrived, his face paint was in disarray and Niwareka's family made fun of his appearance. Feeling guilty and humble, Mataora begged Niwareka for forgiveness, and she accepted his plea. Niwareka's father then taught Mataora the art of tattooing, or Ta Moko, and he and Niwareka returned to the human world, bringing with them this most valuable cultural art form. (Whitmore 2008)

Maori tattoos, mostly on the face, indicated ancestry (the father's side was usually on the left, the mother's on the right) and social position (those without rank would not have a design). Examples of Maori tattoos can be found at: <http://images.google.com/images?um=1&hl=en&q=+site:travel.nationalgeographic.com+maori+tattoos>.

More information on Maori tattooing can be found at <http://history-nz.org/maori3.html>.

**Basic English:** This is a good lesson to introduce the basic vocabulary and definition of *culture*.

Step 1: Each student finds his or her own definition of culture. Definitions of culture can be found in dictionaries, on the Internet, or by asking parents, guardians, other teachers or school staff, and friends outside the classroom. Students write down the definitions.

Step 2: Each student reads his or her definition to the class, and then expresses it in his or her own words. Does he or she agree or disagree with the definition? Why or why not?

Step 3: A Word Wall is then made to display key vocabulary words such as: *traditions, language, mores, customs, values, beliefs, and authentic artifacts*. Teachers can place a roll of paper on a classroom wall and have students write their definitions of these words as they are presented or discussed. As new words come up in discussions, they are added to the Word Wall.

**Advanced English:** Students will research their own ancestry and draw, on paper, tattoos that would represent that culture or cultures. They will then describe the cultural significance of the tattoos to their classmates.

Step 1: Have students find one or more cultures of their ancestors. (If they do not know about their biological family [for example,

are adopted], have them choose a culture of interest.) Students may choose two cultures, such as one from their mother and another from their father.

Step 2: Students draw a visual representation of the culture or cultures they chose. Encourage students to think about: What distinguishes the chosen culture from other cultures? What might be a visual representation of that culture? For example, in the Maori culture, there might be a picture of a whale. Drawings can be abstract, or they can include certain patterns that represent specific clans in their community in New Zealand.

Step 3 (optional): Students "paint" their faces with their designs; be sure and use washable ink.

Step 4: Students present their designs to the class. In preparing their presentations, students will want to consider:

- Why did they choose their particular designs?
- What do the designs represent in the chosen culture?
- Why are the designs important to them?

**Cultural sustainability:** As a follow-up, have students discuss these questions:

- How is a person's social standing determined and shown in a local indigenous culture?
- How important is ancestry in this culture?

### **Bantu storytelling (Mozambique)**

Obviously, the Internet is an abundant source of information on indigenous cultures, but indigenous students in EFL classes can also be excellent resources. They may not know that. Teachers can help students appreciate their cultural wealth by encouraging them to share the stories, rituals, and traditions that they can gather from their grandparents, older neighbors, religious or spiritual leaders, or community centers—as long as those students feel comfortable sharing with their classmates. It must be noted that there is no generic indigenous person. The backgrounds of students are varied, and no individual student can be expected to represent groups of one ethnicity or another.

Carla Maciel, PhD, uses Bantu oral narratives in the training of EFL teachers in Mozambique. In her research, she presents ways to help students of English who are native speakers of Bantu languages explore how storytellers strategically use language to convey cultural values. She advises EFL teacher trainers to help pre-service teachers develop their sense of self-esteem and build pride in their cultural heritage by gathering oral narratives in their native language, translating them into English, and investigating and determining the deep cultural values encoded in the narratives such as virginity prior to marriage, arranged marriages, the concept of the dowry, motherhood, women's close connection to the earth/land, roles that men and women assume in the traditional society, obligatory family tasks such as cooking, protecting individual members, and raising and educating children (Maciel 2007).

The story "Muatakhaliaka" was collected in Nampula, Mozambique, the area where the Makhuwa ethnic cultural group reside. It is paraphrased below.

When colonists ruled Mozambique, a young man named Muatakhaliaka owed five taxes. One day, he left his village with a few of his friends and went to a town where each of them found work. Muatakhaliaka's job was as a cook.

Muatakhaliaka was not able to visit his wife on the weekends, but his friends regularly went back to the village. They sometimes would see Muatakhaliaka's wife, and when they would return to the town, they would tell Muatakhaliaka that his wife had no clothes; she had nothing to wear. Muatakhaliaka would explain that he couldn't do anything about it. He was busy working. Muatakhaliaka's friends did not approve of his behavior.

After six months, Muatakhaliaka and his friends finished their jobs and returned to their village. When they went to an administrative office to receive their salaries, Muatakhaliaka's friends received the money they deserved, but Muatakhaliaka received almost nothing. The manager told him that he had worked for free.

The last line of the story is: "Muatakhaliaka is a name that should not be given to anybody" (Maciel 2007, 144).

Many cultural components are at play in this story, and teachers may need to help students understand why Muatakhaliaka was punished. In Makhuwa culture, the systems of kinship and marriage have great relevance. Makhuwa society is matrilineal, and Muatakhaliaka normally would have lived with his wife in the home or at least on the land of his wife's family and worked in the fields of his (grand)mother-in-law and help produce food that would benefit his wife's family. At the time of colonial rule, Makhuwan men were expected, as primary money-makers, to provide clothing for their wives.

Muatakhaliaka disregarded the rules of his local community. He did not fulfill his obligations to his wife's kin or perform in a husband's role as agricultural producer, and he was so obsessed with his work that he failed to visit his wife on weekends. Therefore, he was punished and did not receive the money he needed to pay his taxes.

**Basic English:** Students hear a native story and learn vocabulary that they can recycle to tell or write a story of their own.

Step 1: Invite a native storyteller to visit your class and tell a short cultural story (first in English and then in his or her native language, if possible). Have the storyteller tell you the story before class so you can prepare a pre-listening activity to teach students some of the key vocabulary. For example, you could write the vocabulary words and definitions on cards, put the students in groups of four or five, give each student a card, and have students take turns miming the words on their cards while the other students in the group guess the words.

Step 2: The native storyteller comes to your class and tells the story (first in English and then in his or her native language, if possible, so students can hear the sounds of both languages).

Step 3: In pairs, students retell the story in their own words in English to a partner.

Step 4: In the same pairs, students write their own short story using as many of the words from the pre-listening activity as possible.

**Advanced English:** Students relate the story of Muatakaliaka to their personal experiences, work with a story from a culture of their choice, and then write a short story to explain contemporary cultural norms to visiting foreign students.

Step 1: Put students into groups of three or four and have them discuss the following questions:

1. How relevant are the systems of kinship and marriage in our culture?
2. In terms of education and foreign languages, are there gender inequalities in our culture? For example, in rural areas, do parents send children of one gender to school more often than children of the other gender? Do boys or girls get preferential treatment for learning languages?
3. In our culture, do men or women who live in rural areas usually travel to cities to work? If so, do the workers have any benefits that their spouses who stay home don't get?
4. Do you know anyone personally, or have you heard of someone, who had to migrate or immigrate for work? How did those temporary migratory movements impact the lives of the workers and those of their spouses, children, or parents?

Step 2: Have students find and research a story from a culture of their choice. They can search on the Internet, talk with their relatives or older neighbors, go to a cultural center and look for old pictures or newspaper articles, etc.

Step 3: Students retell the story to the class. Optionally, they can prepare some questions for their classmates to discuss afterward.

Step 4: Tell students to imagine that some foreign exchange students are going to come to study at your school next term. Ask students to write their own creative, entertaining stories in English to explain components of the contemporary (not traditional) culture for these visiting foreigners. For example, students might explain the following:

- What are typical weekend activities for students in our culture, and why are they popular?

- What and when do people typically eat in our culture?
- Who are the most relevant popular culture icons, and why are people interested in them?

**Cultural sustainability:** Have students refer back to the stories they found in Step 2. Ask them to identify some of the deep cultural values that are encoded in the narratives. Then ask students to discuss:

- Are there similarities among the values illustrated in these stories?
- Why do you think these concepts are important to these cultures?

### **Prayer flags and environmental poetry (Tibet)**

*Mi chös*, or “man’s dharma,” is a spiritual folk religion in Tibet. It is closely related to Buddhism; followers believe spirits reside everywhere, including air, water, and land. Interestingly, the colors of Buddhist prayer flags are symbolic of the earth’s elements. The red, green, blue, white, and yellow represent fire, wood, water, iron, and the earth. Prayer flags are flown near water, on top of mountains, monasteries, and on people’s houses. It is believed that when the flags flutter in the wind, the writings on the flags are released to the heavens.

More information on prayer flags can be found at [www.khandro.net/practice\\_prayer\\_flags.htm](http://www.khandro.net/practice_prayer_flags.htm).

**Basic English:** Students learn basic vocabulary of colors and earth’s elements.

Step 1: Students choose one of the five colors and elements. Each student will have a colored piece of paper or material to represent a flag.

Step 2: Students write short sentences regarding environmental issues related to the element they choose. For example, on a blue piece of material, a student might write about water pollution, on green material about the lack of wood for heating homes where forests have been cut down, or on a red flag about how burning in the Amazon rainforest affects the habitat.

Step 3: Students share their sentences with the class and hang up their “flag” in the room. Some questions the class can ask the presenting student are:

- Why did you choose that color?
- What is happening in our country regarding this issue?–
- Is this issue a problem elsewhere in the world?

**Advanced English:** Students choose a colored piece of material (not necessarily one of the five above), write about what that color represents, and/or write a poem about an environmental issue.

Step 1: Students determine an environmental issue that is important to them (e.g., air or water pollution, global warming, deforestation).

Step 2: Students choose a piece of paper or material in a color they feel represents their chosen environmental issue.

Step 3 (option 1): Students write about their chosen issue on their paper or material. They will want to consider:

- What is this issue? (definition)
- Why is this issue important?
- What is being done to address this issue?
- How might the class affect this issue?

Step 3 (option 2): Students write a short poem about an environmental issue. (The questions above can give them ideas.)

**Cultural sustainability:** Have students discuss the questions below.

- Do certain colors of a local indigenous culture represent specific things?
- Does this indigenous culture have a flag that represents its values and beliefs?
- What environmental issues would be important to this indigenous culture?

### **Beading and mathematics (South Africa)**

Most indigenous cultures use beads or shells in their jewelry and cultural artifacts. These objects can be used to learn mathematics and English (Miller and Davison 2001). The colors and patterns of the beading often indicate the wearer’s culture and clan. Blauer (2000, 17) states:

Because the colors of the beads carry such specific meaning, they were used to carry messages, known as *ucu*, a Zulu [the largest tribe in southern Africa] term that translates loosely as ‘love letters.’ These beautiful, silent messengers

can tell the state of a romance. Specific beadwork also identifies a *sangoma* (healer and seer). *Sangomas* are often women and wear distinctive beaded headpieces, which obscure their faces behind a veil of beads.

More information on Zulu beading can be found at [www.marques.co.za/clients/zulu](http://www.marques.co.za/clients/zulu).

**Basic English:** Students learn basic colors, numbers, and vocabulary words such as *pattern*, *repetition*, and *sequence*.

Step 1: Teachers string different colored beads on shoelaces in various patterns, one shoelace for each student, or one each for groups of three or four students if beads and shoelaces are limited. Each student or group is given a beaded shoelace (knotted at both ends of the pattern) and a small bag of colored beads.

Step 2: Students or groups must discover the bead sequence, describe the pattern out loud (“one yellow bead, then three green beads,” etc.), and make a pattern like it on their own shoelace.

Step 3: Students then pair up (or do this within their small groups), design their own patterns, and see if their partners (or other group members) can duplicate the patterns.

**Advanced English:** Students can look at more advanced mathematical formulas. For example, two red beads, one green bead, three red beads, one blue bead, and five red beads could be  $2 + 3 = 5$  (red beads are the numerals, the green bead “plus,” and the blue bead “equals”). Or eight red beads, two blue beads, and four green beads could signify  $8 \div 2 = 4$ . One white bead, three yellow beads, five blue beads, seven red beads, and eleven green beads might represent prime numbers. Students then create their own mathematical formulas.

**Cultural sustainability:** Encourage students to explore the following:

- What patterns and colored beads might be distinctive to a local indigenous culture?
- What other indigenous arts or crafts use patterns? Do these patterns represent certain mores or values of that indigenous culture? Are they distinctive for that specific culture?

### Star quilts and English language (United States)

Some North American Indians make star quilts to celebrate special events such as births, weddings, and funerals. For example, after a birth, the new parents give star quilts to their families and friends to honor the support these people have shown the couple. At one-year anniversaries of the death of a loved one, people present star quilts to those who have been particularly kind to the deceased's family during that difficult year.

To give a star quilt shows respect and honor to the person receiving this gift. Some tribes believe a star quilt represents the morning star, signifying a new beginning. Other tribes believe it represents all stars, or the "Creator's Eye" looking upon the tribe. Another belief is that the spirits of the tribe's ancestors are housed in the stars and that these ancestors are watching over the tribe. For example, the Milky Way galaxy has been called a "Pathway of Departed Souls." Some believe the entity of the departed passes along this pathway to its final resting place at the Southern Star. These souls give spiritual blessings and protection to the mortals left on earth (Wicasa, n.d.).

More information on star quilts can be found at [www.bluecloud.org/morningstar.html](http://www.bluecloud.org/morningstar.html) and (picture of a star quilt) [www.bbhc.org/pointsWest/PWArticle.cfm?ArticleID=159](http://www.bbhc.org/pointsWest/PWArticle.cfm?ArticleID=159).

**Basic English:** Students learn parts of speech such as nouns, verbs, adjectives, and adverbs.

Step 1: Students cut out eight diamonds (in paper or material) that will fit together to form a circle. (The inside apex of each diamond must be a 45-degree angle.) Teachers will give students a reading passage on Star Quilts such as the two introductory paragraphs above (or a selection taken from a website), or several readings at different English levels if the class needs that.

Step 2: Students will find eight verbs (or whatever part of speech you want to teach), write one on each diamond (for example, "explains" and "passes") and put them together to make one inner star. Eight verbs from the above passage could be: *celebrate, give, honor, present, shows, believe, represents, and passes*.

Step 3: A second star of 16 diamonds (identical to the first ones) could then be used for nouns (or other words) for a second outer

star built from the first inner star. Make these diamonds a contrasting color to the original eight diamonds in the inner circle. Examples from the paragraphs above are: *star, weddings, birth, parents, quilts, family, friends, person, gift, tribe, spirits, ancestors, pathway, blessings, protection, and earth*.

Step 4: Students can continue making rings of diamonds for each part of speech. (Each part of speech can have its own color.)

**Advanced English:** Like a Word Web (where students build on an initial concept), more advanced students can use the diamond stars when writing English paragraphs. The first eight-diamond star includes the eight main ideas of the composition; the outer star is made up of supporting ideas, etc. For example, if students were writing about the preservation of indigenous languages, one diamond in the inner circle could be "current status of that language." Expanding on that idea, a diamond in the second outer circle could be the statistics about how many people currently speak the language. The second diamond in the outer circle that expands on the original inner idea could indicate whether that language is being taught in the schools today.

**Cultural sustainability:** Find or create a reading of a cultural tradition of a local indigenous culture. Use that reading for the above activities on parts of speech and writing development.

### Conclusion

Using these lessons will expose students to international cultures and geography. Although specific countries have been targeted as examples in this article, the primary concepts—storytelling, visual arts, beading, and cultural physical expressions—are fairly universal in most cultures. Teachers can also adapt these lessons to make them better relate to local indigenous culture(s). Interestingly, despite the loss or future loss of an indigenous language, the "roots" of that indigenous culture can be preserved through the learning of another language, such as English; just as the proper physical elements (sun, water, nutrients) allow prairie grasses to regrow, linguistic and cultural elements can be revived and reborn as well.

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