

2.2.2 Large and small cultures in ELT

Transcript

Slide 1

In this section of our course, we are going to focus on the cultural component of English language teaching and the ways in which this could be enriched by adopting an ELF-aware perspective.

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More specifically, we are going to discuss the concept of '**culture**' in terms of the various aspects it may have and the several issues it may be associated with and, in this regard, we are going to highlight the differences between what is called a 'large' and a 'small' culture. The term 'small culture' was also mentioned in the sections "ELF-aware teaching" and the "Content of ELF-aware teaching" but, in this video, we are going to see in more detail what it involves. As far as large cultures are concerned, we are going to discuss the social and pedagogical value of European Cultural Heritage. Then, we will focus on small cultures and see how they relate to intercultural communication in English as a lingua franca. Helping you raise your awareness of the role and place of culture in your own teaching context is highlighted throughout the whole section.

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Let's begin with Activity 1. Please, click the link under the video to access this Activity if you haven't done so yet and take your time to carry it out before you go on with the rest of this video. It will help you see how you define the concept of culture and the role it may have in your teaching practices.

So, think about your own experience as a teacher of English. Focus on what we usually teach in our EFL classrooms and what cultural matters we want our learners to be aware of.

- What topics related to culture could ELT activities revolve around? Make a short list in the text box provided in this Activity and try to identify at least three topics.
- Then, you will see a list of 15 possible topics related to culture. How important is each of them to you? Select five topics that, in your opinion, are those that are most important to include in English language teaching.

These are very important questions so please think about them for a while before submitting your responses if you haven't done so yet. Then, continue with this video.

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Now, let us discuss these issues in more detail. In the list included in Activity 1, you may have noticed some topics which we typically associate with 'culture' and some others that, at first sight at least, might not seem very relevant. This is because of the highly elusive and complex nature of this concept. As theorist Raymond Williams wrote back in 1976, "culture' is one of the two or three most complicated words". So, depending on how we approach it, it may mean various things. UNESCO provides a very interesting and inclusive definition: **culture** is "the set of *distinctive* spiritual, material, intellectual and emotional features of society or a *social group*." It is the bond, in other words, not only between humans and society in general but also among people who belong to a particular social group – and includes all kinds of features that those people may share and may bring them closer to one another on a spiritual, material, intellectual, or emotional level. It encompasses, that is, what may add **internal cohesion**, let's say, to a social group, what may make it a group in the first place and what may make it differ from other social groups.

In this sense, of course, the term 'culture' may refer to the distinctive features of **all kinds of social groups**, no matter how **large** or **small**, or how wide or narrow they may be. We may talk, for instance, about the culture of very large groups, like the Europeans or the Asians, or about the culture of smaller but still quite large groups, like the Greeks, the Italians, or the Norwegians, all of whom also belong, of course, to the wider European group – and we may even talk about the culture of smaller groups, like a particular school community, or a group of colleagues working on a project, or a specific group of friends.

That being said, we usually tend to associate the term 'culture' with large groups and the cultural features which make up the '**cultural heritage**' of that groups, that is, in short, what the members of that group may leave as a 'legacy' for future generations. We often, for example, highlight visual and performance arts, such as painting, sculpting and dancing, the traditions, languages and customs of the group, the literary works that members of that group have produced and so forth. By and large, such topics are also the most usual ones when it comes to the integration of culture in teaching and learning and, perhaps, you may have described them yourself while carrying out Activity 1.

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Let us now see some aspects that the 'culture' of small or large groups may have. Martyn Barrett, Michael Byram and their associates note that 'culture' may include **material**, **social** and **subjective** features and qualities. '**Material**

culture refers to physical tangible objects that are created and commonly used by the members of a social group. ELT activities, in this sense, may focus, for instance, on art work, buildings, tools, clothing, temples, food and so forth, with reference, as we have said, most especially, to 'large cultures'. When it comes to 'small cultures', like the culture that exists in a particular classroom, 'material' aspects could include, for example, certain artifacts the teacher and learners employ in that class, like portfolios, which somehow reflect the overall atmosphere and dynamics in this social group.

'Social' and 'subjective' culture refers to intangible features and qualities that the members of a group may share. ELT activities revolving around **'social culture'** may, therefore, focus on social institutions, means and resources, such as languages, religion, folklore, customs, dances, cultural icons and so forth, while activities about the **'subjective culture'** of a group could focus on beliefs, collective memories, attitudes, values and practices that the members share. These aspects again may refer to the cultures of all social groups, regardless of their possible size.

How could these aspects of culture though be represented in practice in ELT?

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This brings us to Activity 2 of this section, which focuses on the **European Cultural Heritage**, that is, the large culture of the social group that Europeans, as a whole, make up. 2018 was called the European Year of Cultural Heritage so, please, first of all, visit the website of the European Commission dedicated to this aspect to familiarize yourself a bit with the aims and the various activities carried out in this context. You can find the link under the video.

Then, please click the link of Activity 2, which is also under the video. There are 3 very important questions in this Activity. The first one invites you to go through three short paragraphs describing tangible and intangible forms of the European Cultural Heritage and see if they relate to the 'material', 'social' or 'subjective' aspects of culture. Then, in the second question, you will see 3 sample ELT activities, similar to those we often use in our classrooms. Based on the discussion provided so far in this video and, of course, your own experience as a teacher, do they focus on the 'material', 'social', or 'subjective' culture of the European social group? Finally, the third question focuses on the social and pedagogical value of the European Cultural Heritage. There you will see a short text with a few blank spaces and will be asked to fill them in by choosing the appropriate missing word each time.

So please pause the video now and take your time to carry out this Activity. When you finish, please return to the video.

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Now, let us discuss the issues included in Activity 2 in more detail, focusing first on the three ELT activities presented there. The first one, as you can see again here, has a nice picture of various buildings and other structures found across Europe and asks the learners to see whether they can identify some of them and whether they know in which country and for what purpose they have been created. This activity obviously revolves around the ‘material’ aspects of culture. Another example could be, for instance, asking the learners to discuss food, clothes, monuments or other physical objects found in various communities within or across Europe.

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The second activity is a little bit more advanced, let’s say, than the first one and asks the learners to create a project about a European country, focusing on the languages and customs that can be found there. It revolves, that is, on the ‘social’ aspects of culture and, in this regard, what is highly interesting is that the learners are actually invited to reflect on the ways the social culture of the country they work on relates to their own. It asks, therefore, “in your country, do you use any words or phrases originating from the language or languages spoken there?” and “do you have any similar customs?”. Such questions are indeed quite significant when we want our learners to go beyond the surface and start reflecting on how ‘culture’ may affect their own personal lives as members of wide and narrow social groups.

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This is illustrated more eloquently in the third ELT activity which, as you may have determined yourself, focuses on ‘subjective’ aspects of culture. It engages, that is, the learners in reflecting on attitudes, values, principles and beliefs which somehow unite the members of the social group – in this case, the Europeans, as a whole – such as democracy, equality, openness and respect for other people, and in addressing, to the extent that they can of course, four highly important questions: What does Europe mean to *you*? How do *you* understand ‘living all together in diversity’? What makes us all *unique* and what exactly *connects* us all together? Reflecting on such issues is certainly crucial not only for learners who have been born and raised as members of that particular social group but also for new members – for learners, that is, who may have recently moved to a European country for whatever reason.

A key question which may arise at this point, however, is **what role exactly does *English play*** in all these – and more specifically, what is the role of **English as a lingua franca**, i.e. ELF, within the European cultural heritage or, in fact, within the cultural heritage of any other major social group, such as the Asians. As highlighted in other sections of this course, ELF is, in essence, a contact or a ‘shared’ language facilitating communication among people of various linguistic

and cultural backgrounds. It is a means or a resource which people from any social group currently employ and, in this sense, it can be regarded as part of the 'social' culture of Europeans, as well. The answer to the question "what connects us together" in this activity could, therefore, include English as well, this way making the links between culture and English language teaching even more evident.

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This brings us to the third question of Activity 2, discussing the **social and pedagogical value of European Cultural Heritage**. In this regard, engaging with the 'material' and, most importantly, with the 'social' and 'subjective' aspects of culture is more than significant in several perspectives, including, as illustrated in the text in Activity 2, the promotion of social cohesion, equality and interaction.

For instance, activities which involve the learners in discussing and reflecting upon intangible aspects of their own and other cultures, such as shared principles and values, may help them strengthen their social and cultural *identity*, gain a sense of *belonging* to the broader social group and develop, as we have noted earlier, an awareness of who they are and of the ways in which their own culture may relate to other cultures. This way separation and 'othering' can be avoided, which, in short, refers to viewing oneself as 'different' from 'others' or even as 'superior' or 'inferior' compared to 'others'. Such activities in fact may also help the learners avoid over-generalising and stereotyping, for instance, judging people based on commonly held beliefs or assumptions about a social group which may not be true. In this sense, ELT may not only promote multilingualism and multiculturalism but also social equality and other truly democratic values.

Now, in order for the learners to be able to relate to and form bonds with members of other groups and other people, in general, they need, above all, to be able to interact with them. To this end, raising their awareness of the relationship between language and culture is extremely important. Language, as we mentioned earlier, is part of the 'social' aspect of culture and, in turn, culture is expressed in and influences language and communication. So, how can we help the learners engage successfully in social interaction and, more specifically, in intercultural communication? It is this highly important issue in ELT that we will now turn to.

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What is **intercultural communication**? It is, of course, communication that takes place during an intercultural encounter, that is, an encounter or an interaction between people with different cultures or different cultural affiliations. It is communication, in other words, between people who belong to

different social groups, which, as we have already highlighted, may be of different sizes – they may be very large, e.g. ‘Europe’, and they may be very small, say, a group of friends.

Imagine an encounter between people coming from different broad groups, for instance, between a Greek and a Portuguese person. As these people get together and interact with each other using English as a lingua franca, they create on the spot a new small social group which has its own ‘small culture’, i.e. its own distinctive features that render their group cohesive and their interaction in ELF successful. Their communication, though, reflects and is influenced by the cultures, either large or small, each of them is affiliated with and, in essence, this is precisely what makes that encounter an ‘intercultural encounter’. Now, this ‘small culture’ social group that they create can last and evolve as they continue interacting with each other, but it could be temporal, like the brief interactions we have with people that we never meet again.

Now, what happens when we focus on **‘large’** or **‘small’ cultures** during communication and, most importantly in our case, during English language teaching? When we focus on large cultures, we sometimes tend to overgeneralize and judge people based on pre-determined and, by and large, stereotypical characteristics, which of course, as we mentioned before, may not always be true. We meet a Greek person and we may say, for example, “ah she is Greek, she must be very loud” and this assumption may in fact affect our interaction with her. Accordingly, in English language teaching, emphasizing ‘large culture’ this way often results in stereotypical assumptions like “the British are always polite”, or “the Americans are always extrovert” or, as a matter of fact, “the native speakers as a whole speak the best English”. Focusing on ‘small cultures’, on the other hand, is quite different in that it involves trying to determine the particular characteristics that make each social group cohesive, or else, the characteristics that make each specific intercultural interaction successful and harmonious. This aspect is generally missing from current ELT practices so enriching them in this regard is what ELF-aware teaching essentially involves as regards the cultural component.

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Let us see in more detail how intercultural communication in ELF could be integrated in our classrooms. The factors influencing ELF interactions are thoroughly discussed in the sections of this course focusing on ELF, such as the section on ‘ELF discourse’ and ‘Translanguaging’, but raising our learners’ awareness of them is also highly important.

Now, communication in ELF, as you already know, mainly involves non-native speakers. This means, first of all, that they do not necessarily share similar communicative competences, and second, that, since they come from different linguistic and cultural backgrounds, there is not always familiarity with each

other's linguistic and cultural norms. The learners, therefore, need to be aware that, when these people get together and form a 'small' or microcosmic group, which, as we said before, may well be temporary or transient, they somehow need to cooperate with each other to find some common ground. They need, that is, to negotiate the meaning and, while they do so, they do not necessarily rely on or act in accordance with native speakers' cultural norms and conventions, or the linguistic ones for that matter. They primarily rely on their own cultural resources which are unavoidably reflected in the way they use English. They sometimes, for instance, create idioms on the spot or use expressions very creatively or behave in a certain manner, and, this way, they project their social and cultural identity. In turn, in order to make their communication 'tick', people often need to adjust or modify their English according to the needs of the people they are talking with, which is what accommodation is all about, and necessarily this requires knowing how to reconcile their own culture with the culture of somebody else.

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This brings us to the need to integrate **Intercultural Awareness** in English Language Teaching, especially as regards intercultural communication using English as a Lingua Franca. Being a very significant part of ELF awareness, which is discussed by Prof. Sifakis in the section "ELF aware teaching", Intercultural Awareness refers, in short, to two things:

First, it refers to our conscious understanding of the role that culturally based forms and practices may have in intercultural communication - in other words, of the ways, as we said earlier, that culture may influence language and communication - and, second, it refers to our ability to put this understanding into practice in a flexible and context-specific way - that is, to actually participate in 'small culture' interactions appropriately and effectively.

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Let us see what this may mean in practice and how **ELT** may focus on 'large' or 'small' cultures. To this end, we are going to see some specific ELT activities, evaluate them and, then, think how we could enrich them, if necessary, through an ELF-aware 'small culture' perspective.

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First of all, in order to **evaluate ELT activities** and determine whether they focus on '**large**' or '**small**' cultures, we could ask ourselves a range of questions based on the issues we have discussed so far. The major question is, of course, do they talk about the culture of individual countries as a whole or about the culture that is reflected in particular ELF interactions? Focusing on the culture of individual countries as a whole is, of course, perfectly fine but we need to ask: do these

activities somehow overgeneralise and assume that all people in those countries have a set of pre-determined characteristics? Do they urge the learners to obey at all costs some specific cultural norms and conventions? Do they promote, perhaps, certain stereotypes? Do they, directly or indirectly, present some cultures as superior or inferior, this way fostering assumptions related to otherism and culturism? If so, of course, we, as teachers, need to find a way to modify such activities and one way to do it is enrich them with a “small culture” perspective – that is, by placing more emphasis on actual communication.

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Let's see a specific ELT activity. This is sample number 4, since samples 1, 2 and 3 referred to the European Cultural Heritage that we talked about at the first part of this video. Now, this is a type of activity we find very frequently in ELT courseware. There is a text that the learners need to read and then there are two questions. The first one is a reading comprehension question where the learners are asked to determine which paragraph talks about, for example, transportation in London and, then, the second one, focuses on vocabulary. That being said, the activity obviously focuses on culture as well – so, does it talk about the culture of an individual country as a whole or does it talk about the culture that is reflected in real-life communication, even within that country itself? It is quite evident that it focuses on the ‘large culture’ associated with the British social group. We can see, for instance, pictures of the flag, the Big Ben and other physical objects related to the ‘material’ aspect of the British culture and, when we go through the text, we will find out that emphasis is also placed on ‘social’ and ‘subjective’ aspects. What perspective, though, is being adopted?

First of all, does the text somehow overgeneralise? The answer is yes. It is mentioned, for example, at the beginning of the second paragraph, that people in London regularly carry sunglasses and umbrellas throughout the year and, later on, that they are generally polite and helpful, that they are not loud and so forth. The image of a ‘typical’ Londoner is this way described in a very stereotypical way, through features which we *assume* are true but, in reality, cannot possibly characterize all Londoners we may meet in our lives. On this basis, does the activity somehow promote assumptions related culturism and otherism? The very fact that so much emphasis is placed on British culture in an EFL activity, without fostering critical reflection in any obvious way, is a very serious indication that, yes, this activity promotes the image of a linguistically and, especially in this case, a culturally superior native speaker. This is more evident in the last paragraph, which describes do's and don'ts when interacting with Londoners, like ‘always say please and thank you’ and ‘don't be loud or obnoxious’ because otherwise the Londoners, who are very quiet and polite, will not welcome you in their group.

The thing, in this regard, is that such comments, especially when they are very often presented, directly or indirectly, in EFL classrooms, may make the learners

feel that their own culture and their own identity as users of English and as individuals in general may be inferior or less 'worthy' somehow compared to that of native speakers. This, in turn, may lead to feelings of embarrassment, to lack of self-confidence and, of course, to the highly problematic assumption that in order for you to be 'perfect', both linguistically and culturally, you need to speak and act like a native speaker. This is problematic because, in real life communication in ELF, other factors, like intelligibility and accommodation, matter more than adherence to native speaker norms.

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What can we do, then, to **modify** this kind of activities that are found so frequently in our courseware? We can **enrich** them through a 'small-culture' ELF-aware perspective by including, when appropriate, some **reflective questions** fostering **metalinguistic** and **metacognitive awareness**. These are discussed in detail in the sections "ELF-aware teaching" and "The content of ELF-aware teaching". As regards culture in particular, such metalinguistic questions could aim at helping the learners notice and reflect on the interplay between language and culture in real-life ELF discourse communities, that is, within the 'small-cultures' that are established each time between the speakers, and at helping them learn how to employ their plurilingual and pluricultural repertoires in various socio-cultural contexts – how to employ, that is, all of the languages and cultural resources they may have at their disposal. Accordingly, metacognitive questions could help the learners reflect on their attitudes and identify any stereotypical perceptions they may have. To this end, engaging them in discussing their own real-life experiences in intercultural communication in relation to the ways that this may be presented in their courseware and elsewhere is, of course, very important.

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So how could we enrich this ELT activity we just discussed? Here are some indicative metalinguistic and metacognitive questions that could trigger a reflective discussion with the learners. We could ask them, for example: Have you ever been / Would you ever go to London? Why? As an English learner, what do you think about London and the UK? Why? How are the British presented in this specific text? How is their culture presented? What do you think about it? Why? Do you think the information in the text applies to all British people? Why or why not? Questions beginning with "Why" are significant in this regard – they ask the learners to try to discuss the reasons why they think what they think, and perhaps determine the factors that may have influenced their thinking. Other questions could include: Do people from other countries live in London? In what ways may their culture relate to the culture of the British people? In what ways could it relate to your own culture?

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And about the relationship between language and culture in particular: - What do you think about the English of British people? Why? How do you view the English other people use? How do you view the way you use English? What is 'good English' to you? Why? What kind of English did/would you use in London? With whom? Why? Now this is important since, London is a very multicultural and multilingual environment, there are lots of so-called non-native speakers, so the learners could be asked: Were there/would there be any obstacles in communicating with native and non-native speakers? How did/would you overcome them? How did/would you make your interactions 'tick' - for instance, through translanguaging, or by using a joke that is funny in your culture? And finally: - Do you think a person's culture is/should be reflected in the way he/she communicates? Why and How? What do you think when it happens? Why do you think that?

Such discussion could, in fact, enrich all kinds of ELT activities, depending, as always, on parameters such as the learners' age, their particular language needs, their experience in ELF communication and so forth.

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On this basis, let us move on to our Activity 3. You will see three more sample ELT activities, that is Sample 5, 6 and 7. How would you describe or evaluate each of them as regards the integration of culture in them? How would you improve them, if necessary, by integrating a small-culture, ELF-aware perspective in a way that is relevant to your own context? These are highly important questions in terms of finding out for yourself how you could integrate ELF awareness in your teaching so, please, pause the video now, click the link underneath to access Activity 3 and take your time to carry it out and share your views. When you finish, continue with this video.

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Let us briefly discuss these activities. Sample 5 is a speaking activity, perhaps for younger learners or learners with a relatively low proficiency level. It asks them to look at the people on these three pictures and discuss where they come from, where they are and what they are doing. Now, as you may have noticed already, this activity does not focus on culture per se, for instance, on the 'large culture' of a wide social group, but the pictures it employs are obviously selected on purpose to add a multicultural perspective. The questions, though, do not engage the learners at all in discussing, even at a basic level, what multiculturalism may actually involve, which, in fact, somehow may make the use of these particular pictures seem rather stereotypical. Actually, it seems that the questions there focus on grammatical structures, i.e. how to use the Present Simple and Present Continuous Tenses, more than anything else.

They could be enriched, though. Young learners could be asked, for example, simple yet reflective metalinguistic and metacognitive questions, like ‘what do you think of the people in these pictures and why?’, ‘what language do you think they use to communicate with each other or with people from other countries?’, ‘what do you have in common with these people’, or, let’s say, ‘imagine that you meet one of these people, how would you greet him or her and why?’, ‘if you didn’t know, would you be able to understand what country he or she comes from? How?’, or, about the lady giving a presentation on the picture on the left, for example, ‘what proverb or other expression from your country could you tell her to encourage her and wish her good luck in her presentation?’ and so forth.

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Moving on to Sample 6, we can see that this activity looks a bit like the one we discussed earlier about London. This one also has a reading text, followed this time by some True or False questions. As you may have highlighted yourself, it focuses on ‘large culture’, and, most specifically, on the culture of Japan, as a whole, describing material aspects, like buildings, and social aspects, like customs and traditions, in a rather stereotypical way as well. What is highly interesting, though, is that this particular text is supposed to be written by Hana, a teenage girl from Japan and, at the same time, it contains impeccable English – English that an ‘ideal’ native speaker would use. In this sense, the activity may in theory talk about the culture of Japan but the goal is to expose the learners in native-speaker conventions of written language.

How could we enrich this activity? In the last paragraph, for example, Hana mentions that she has some ‘international’ friends, Lucy, Pablo and Michelle. So, we could ask the learners questions like ‘what kind of English do these friends use to talk to each other, say, on the internet?’, ‘do you think they may face any problems?’, ‘what kind of problems would those be and how could they overcome them?’, ‘what cultural elements do they all have in common?’ and so forth. In fact, we could also have a letter written by a real teenager for the learners to see for themselves how culture is reflected in someone’s language, the differences between written and spoken discourse and so on.

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Finally, Sample 7 is an activity focusing on developing the learners’ listening skills while also engaging them in reflection and critical thinking. It is addressed most probably to learners with an intermediate level of proficiency and, unlike the previous ones, it does indeed focus on the ‘small culture’ that can be established in real-life communication. How do we know that? For one, it asks the learners to watch and evaluate a video illustrating an authentic interaction among ELF speakers, who are very competent by the way. Now, you may remember this video, it’s an interview with Sakis Rouvas about his participation in the Eurovision

song contest a few years ago, and we also used it in the section of the course entitled 'Key issues in using ELF'. The reflective questions there addressed to you could, in this sense, be transformed in a way to be addressed to the learners as well.

This particular activity, for instance, asks them first to think and predict, and then, to watch, notice and evaluate, how the speakers interact with one another and why and what elements of their culture appear on their communication. It also focuses, of course, on the learners' attitudes and their views about their own future interactions, most especially through the last two questions, asking "how would you evaluate the interaction and why" and 'how the lessons learned through this activity could be useful to you in the future'. Now, if we wanted to enrich this activity, we could also have more specific tasks that engage the learners in noticing and evaluating particular features illustrated in the video, for instance, how the speakers use translanguaging and accommodation strategies to show they understand and appreciate each other's cultural affiliations.

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On this basis, let us now proceed to Activity 4.

Click the link under the video to do this Activity and share your views at the Forum of this section:

- What do you think about the large- and small-culture perspectives in ELF-aware teaching and in ELT in general? To what extent do you agree or disagree with the discussion in this video? Why?
- To what extent are the large- and small-culture perspectives illustrated in your textbook or other materials you use? Discuss an ELT activity as an example. How would you improve or enrich it?

These are very important questions in terms of helping you see how you could implement ELF-aware teaching in your classrooms so, please, think about them for a while and share your views with your colleagues.

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So, what have we discussed in this section about culture? We started with highlighting that this is a very complex concept including a range of elements and aspects, such as the material, social and subjective ones. Then, we discussed how 'large culture', i.e. the culture of wide social groups, can be integrated in English language teaching and, to this end, we referred in particular to the European cultural heritage. Afterwards, we focused on 'small cultures', i.e. the culture established in particular interactions among people, and briefly discussed what this involves as regards intercultural communication and the

development of intercultural awareness. And finally, we discussed several ELT activities revolving around culture, evaluated them and saw how we could enrich them through a 'small culture' ELF-aware perspective.

What we always need to remember is that everything, including the extent to which ELF-aware teaching should be implemented in the classroom, depends on the **learners' actual needs** and, of course, on how we, as teachers, define '**good teaching**' in our own context.