

## FOREIGN LANGUAGE LEARNING AND CULTURAL AWARENESS

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### RESUMEN

Después de analizar brevemente el significado de cultura y la relación que existe entre la cultura y la lengua, consideramos la importancia de la adquisición de conocimientos culturales en el proceso de aprendizaje de una lengua extranjera. También contemplamos el papel del profesor en el desarrollo de una “conciencia cultural” en los estudiantes de lenguas extranjeras y concluimos proponiendo diversas maneras de enseñar la cultura.

*Palabras clave: lengua, cultura, aprendizaje de lenguas extranjeras, papel del profesor*

### ABSTRACT

After briefly examining the meaning of “culture” and its relationship with language this paper considers the importance of the acquisition of cultural knowledge in relation to learning a foreign language. The teacher’s role in the development of cultural awareness in students of foreign languages is contemplated and a few of the many ways of teaching culture are considered.

*Key words: language, cultura, foreign language, learning, teacher role*

English Language is taught as an obligatory part of many degrees and diploma courses in the numerous schools and faculties of the University of Las Palmas de Gran Canaria. In the teaching of foreign languages an eclectic approach is generally favoured by most teachers, as different theories of language learning and teaching are often found to be more –or less– suitable, depending upon the task which is to be carried out by the teacher and/or students. Besides the specific and more technical demands of the degree or diploma course being studied, other factors to be taken into account when teaching a foreign language include the nature of the groups involved in the teaching-learning process, the students' language level, their learning styles, levels of motivation and attitudes and expectations, as well as their general workload and the timetabling of lectures.

Language and culture cannot exist independently: each is the shadow of the other to such an extent that language meaning can frequently be obscured if there is no recognition of cultural values. Using a communicative approach in the teaching of language involves teaching many aspects of the culture of the language too. Discussing the importance of cultural awareness in language teaching in his foreword to *Cultural Awareness* (Tomalin and Stempleski, 1993), Alan Maley points out that “the concept of ‘culture’ has become something of a fashionable cliché in language-teaching circles in recent years.” This being said, however, he feels that “culture” is an important component of foreign language programmes and later on, he suggests that culture can be used as a valuable language-learning resource.

In order to determine how teachers of language can help their students to become more culturally aware, they need to have a clear concept of what culture is. In his work on sociolinguistics, R. A. Hudson (1980) makes the practical suggestion that in order to avoid confusion, the term culture should be used in the sense in which cultural anthropologists use it. In their opinion, culture is something that everybody has, it is a “property” of any given community and this property varies from one community to another, thus distinguishing one group or community from another.

For Hudson, W. H. Goodenough's definition of culture as socially acquired knowledge (1957) is inadequate because if, as Goodenough claims, culture is knowledge, it can only exist inside people's heads. As far as Hymes sees it, culture is something which must be learnt: “a society's culture consists of whatever it is one has to know or believe in order to operate in a manner acceptable to its members.” Along with several other definitions in the Collins dictionary, we find that culture is defined as:

1. The total of the inherited ideas, beliefs, values, and knowledge, which constitute the shared bases of social action.
2. The total range of activities and ideas of a group of people with shared traditions, which are transmitted and reinforced by members of the group.
3. A particular civilization at a particular period.
4. The artistic and social pursuits, expressions, and tastes valued by a society or class, as in the arts, manners, dress, etc.
5. The enlightenment or refinement resulting from these pursuits...

On including this definition, it is by no means being suggested that teachers of foreign languages have to try to teach their students the “total” of anything. Indeed, one wonders if even the culturally well-informed teacher possesses knowledge which could be described as being anywhere near to approaching a miniscule part of the “totals” quoted above.

Moving into the realms of psychology and sociology, and drawing on the triangular relationship between culture, language and thought, H. Douglas Brown (1980) suggests that “Culture is really an integral part of the interaction between language and thought. Cultural patterns, customs, and ways of life are expressed in language; culture-specific world views are reflected in language”.

In a paper which presents a comparative analysis between the Soviet psychologist and semiotician, Lev Semenovich Vygotsky and the American linguist and anthropologist, Benjamin Lee Whorf, Lucy and Wertsch (1987) explain that Vygotsky dedicated much of his professional life to researching into the relationship between genetics, the development of language and thought processes and social interaction. For him, for authentic social interaction among human beings to occur, language has to be involved. Whorf did not develop a specific theory of how language influences thought but it was around the significance of patterns of meaning in language forms that he built his theory of the importance of understanding language and therefore culture. Lucy and Wertsch reach the conclusion that although the views of the two men are quite different, their approaches are “more complementary than contradictory” since both of them recognised that language serves as a primary mediator between the individual and society.

If language serves the purpose of primary mediator between the individual and society, then we can assume that an individual’s knowledge of different languages permits him or her to have “access” to societies and cultures which are different from his or her native language and culture. This is important for students of translating and interpreting as well as for students of tourism as they will have to act as mediators between different languages and cultures. In foreign

language teaching, it is generally accepted that the most successful foreign language learners are those who are able to take on the “mindset” of the speakers of the language being learnt. On doing this, they automatically assume the culture along with the language (Valdes, 1986).

Robert Gardner and Wallace Lambert (1972) see acquisition of cultural knowledge as being a vital part of motivation in foreign language learning and they consider that as close a contact as possible between the foreign language learner and the culture of the language being learnt leads to more effective language learning.

The process of gradual adaptation to the target culture without necessarily forsaking one’s own language identity is called “acculturation” (Acton and Walker de Felix, 1986). If students wish to achieve a high level of communicative competence in the language they are learning, they have to adapt, as much as possible, to the target culture. In other words, they must move beyond functional language competence and into the realms of near-native competence.

H. Douglas Brown (1980) stresses the importance of the awareness of foreign language learning contexts as these influence the relationship between foreign language learning and foreign culture learning. Most students of foreign languages learn them within their own native culture: the vast majority are unable to learn a foreign language within the culture of the foreign language. Brown, who uses the terms “second” and “foreign” language learning interchangeably, points out:

Each type of second language situation involves different degrees of acculturation. Second language learning in a foreign culture... [i.e. within the culture of the language being learnt] clearly involves the deepest form of acculturation... Second language learning in the native culture [i.e. on the student’s “home-ground”] varies in the severity of acculturation experienced by the learner, depending on the country, the cultural and sociopolitical status of the language, and the motivations or aspirations of the learner.

According to John Schumann (1976), learners will have greater difficulty acquiring a foreign language if the social distances between their native culture and that of the language they are learning are considerable. The converse should therefore also occur: the shorter the social distance, the easier it should be to learn a language. With Schumann’s hypothesis, problems arise when one has to define what the term social distance means, how differing degrees or levels of social distance can be determined and how this distance can be measured.

Arguing that the actual distance between cultures is not as relevant as what the learner perceives to be the distance between two cultures, William Acton

(1979) devised a measure of *perceived* social distance rather than trying to measure *actual* social distance. Acton drew up a questionnaire known as “Professed Difference in Attitude Questionnaire”, which, according to Brown (1980), measures perceived social distance with remarkable accuracy.

Teachers and students alike must be realistic in their objectives as far as the teaching-learning process of foreign languages is concerned. In the case of students studying foreign languages at the Universidad de Las Palmas de Gran Canaria, many of them have never set foot on foreign soil and although many of them are taught language by native speakers of that language, their contact with the foreign language and culture is limited. This means that in most cases, good learners might be reasonably capable of communicating on a level which requires a certain degree of sophisticated use of language, but, quite often, more subtle cultural connotations go unnoticed. In Mark Clarke’s opinion, (1976), the majority of foreign language students reach a plateau which could be described as a “permanent immigrant” state and very few reach the level of a native speaker.

The influence of art, theatre, literature, travel, tradition, television and radio in teaching and learning about culture cannot be ignored. All these “cultural tools” can be used to considerable advantage by the language teacher who is also a vital instrument in teaching students about culture. Nelson Brooks (1986) feels that “...by means of incidental talk... by means of behaviour traits as speaker and hearer that are authentic and typical... by establishing in the classroom a cultural island made up of both material and non-material elements, and especially by identifying and commenting upon references in literature that are culturally significant”, the teacher can provide students with cultural knowledge which makes their language learning process more meaningful.

Brooks is right to emphasise the importance of the role of the foreign language teacher in the teaching of the foreign culture but the notion of establishing a “cultural island” in the classroom needs to be questioned. The cultural aspects and norms of any group or community cannot be separated from that group: they form an integral part of people’s lives and should always be considered as such. If a “cultural island” within the classroom is set up, this could lead students to believe that culture can be dealt with in isolation and need never be taken outside the classroom. But if students are to practise their language skills, surely they need to be accompanied by the cultural knowledge that will enhance the quality of their communication.

How can foreign language teachers assist students in the acquisition of cultural knowledge which is akin to the language they are learning? A combination of culture with other aspects of language can be introduced into most activities carried out both inside and outside the classroom. It can be included

in conversation classes, in reading material, in listening and speaking tasks and in written work in both individual and group situations.

Assuming that students have a reasonably sound knowledge of their own language and culture, this can be used as a springboard to understanding the attitudes, behaviour and customs of people from other languages and cultures. Once cultural similarities –and differences– have been identified and understood, comparisons and contrasts can be used to advantage in the classroom.

Bullfighting and fox-hunting are obvious examples of activities which are always associated with two specific countries and their corresponding cultures. Given that bullfighting in Spain and fox-hunting in England are both extremely “volatile” subjects, a competent, sensitive language teacher can exploit them to the full. Each “sport” can be dealt with separately and then contrasts and comparisons can be made. From the point of view of language teaching and learning, possibilities are numerous, whilst from a cultural angle, a wealth of material is available. If “sensitive” subjects such as these are intelligently handled, students may come to understand and even accept them as part of the foreign culture-although this does not mean that they have to approve of them.

Literature can provide an endless source of cultural material for language learning although some people would argue that the cultural aspects of any given group or community cannot be conveyed through works of science fiction or pure fantasy. This being said, however, it could also be argued that any piece of literature –including works of science fiction and fantasy– conveys something about the author who belongs to a group or community which forms part of society, and the writer –albeit unconsciously– therefore reflects some aspect of the society or group to which he or she belongs.

In her article “Culture in Literature”, Valdes (1986), discusses using literature to teach culture at appropriate language levels since literature serves as “a medium to transmit the culture of the people who speak the language in which it is written”. She differentiates between books often described as “second language readers” (which are frequently over simplified versions of what was originally a great piece of literature) and real literature, which she defines as “unabridged fiction, drama, poetry, or essay written for an educated audience of native speakers of the language in which it is written.” If we accept Valdes’ definition, this means that foreign language learners need to be in possession of a reasonably high level of language if they are to understand and to extract the cultural content of the text they are reading. If students are able to identify the cultural content of the text, they will be able to discuss the cultural values which are characteristic of societies in general and then move on to dealing with the specific values which may be peculiar to the text under consideration. Opportunities to

compare and contrast literary works from the target and native cultures should not be left to pass in the cases of more advanced students.

In deciding which works to use in the foreign language classroom, it is logical that the teacher selects those which will most probably awaken the interests of the students. If the students' linguistic level is adequate, they will be sufficiently motivated to read, and with the necessary guidance from the teacher, the cultural norms and values contained within the text can be dealt with. Some students might complain that novels are often too long and too difficult to cope with and consequently their motivation might be lowered. However, a carefully selected novel can become a source of a series of cultural patterns and norms that can be traced and considered from beginning to end of the novel. In contrast, short stories can provide more specific examples of cultural behaviour.

Valdes (1986) also considers poetry a valuable source for the teaching of language and culture since it is highly esteemed in many cultures and is therefore of interest to many foreign students. She recognises the problems that can arise with complicated syntax, imagery, metaphor, vocabulary and meaning, yet if the poetry to be studied is carefully selected, none of the above obstacles is insurmountable.

On a practical level, Valdes warns the teacher against giving lectures on the literary material used in class. Greater depth of understanding is often reached through discussion and the sharing of ideas and attitudes: "Be the Knower, point out and explain cultural matters, but do not attempt to be the Oracle."

Given the variety and relevance of many of the cultural references found in journalism, newspaper and magazine articles are also vitally important in the teaching of language and culture as they provide up to date authentic material. However, newspaper and magazine articles are sometimes so culturally-loaded that even educated native speakers occasionally have difficulty understanding them and are unable to go beyond the basic message contained within the text. If native speakers encounter difficulties from time to time, then foreign language students are more likely to come across difficulties. As long as teachers use pieces from newspapers and magazines to guide and stimulate class discussion, then lack of understanding and/or misunderstandings can be cleared up relatively easily and students will be able to grasp the modern aspects of society that are reflected through the content and use of language in the text they are working on.

In conclusion, it can be said that language and culture "shadow" each other to such an extent that they are inextricably linked: the meaning of language can often be obscured if there is insufficient knowledge of the cultural norms and values that are associated with the groups or communities that speak the language. If teachers are creative and wise in their use of materials, the list of

sources and resources in the teaching of cultural awareness through language is never-ending: a few of the many possibilities have barely been touched upon here. Learning about other people's languages and cultures provides students with the opportunity to develop a deeper understanding and greater tolerance of people who are different from them.

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