

Teaching the Concept of “Culture” to ESP Students

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Abstract

The paper deals with the relevance of “culture” in the context of foreign language teaching, and with the adaptation of some classical didactic methods to the present-day dimensions of a dynamic concept of “cultural awareness”. We propose several tasks meant to reinforce students’ empathy potential and professional consciousness.

Key words

cultural awareness, object analysis, encrypting, decrypting, debate, simulation, group, behavior

Our paper has been inspired by the chapter “*Culture: What Makes You A Stranger When You Are Away From Home*” in Roberta Edwards Lenkeit’s 2001 book *Introducing Cultural Anthropology*, a reading that I have almost instinctively associated with one of my daily didactical concerns - that of introducing ESP students to the concept of “culture” and to its problematic area of meanings. Following the author’s reflections on “culture” definitions, the article deals with specific communicative activities that enable the teacher to bring forward “culture” and create a long-term interest in “cultural differences”, an element perceived nowadays as an invariable of today’s working environment and as an indispensable condition for efficient teamwork, for harmonious coexistence and cooperation in the workplace.

ESP students are, from the start, characterized as the human segment devoted to specialized, technically oriented - and, consequently, rather narrow – domains, and the didactic interest in *culture* may be perceived as futile even by tutors themselves. Yet the imperatives of good communication together with the increasingly dynamic labour market make the necessity of *cultural awareness* a permanently renewed desideratum in all present-day domains of human activity. Empathy, integration, collaboration have become paramount in the workplace policies all over the world.

Obviously, students are not completely new to defining “culture” and to the scholarly operated *culture-civilization* opposition. Thus they may be right in providing the *abstract-concrete* or *mental-material* antinomies as the basis for the distinction between *culture* and *civilization*. They may be equally entitled to associate “culture” with *arts*, *literature* or *history* voicing ideas reminiscent of high-school general information.

I have recently noticed that, when asked to define “culture”, the students in several groups have tended to give enumerative definitions in which “habits”, “beliefs”, “ideas” coexisted with “music”, “literature”, “language”, “history”, “behaviour”. In keeping with the principle of proceeding from the known to the unknown, the observation has made me aware of the necessity of offering, at least at the beginning of our “culture” discussion, a similar model based on decomposing the concept into discrete, preferably concrete entities.

A definition proposed, for instance, by *Macmillan English Dictionary* can provide us with an efficient departing point conceived in the manner initiated by the students themselves: “a set of ideas, beliefs and ways of behaving of a particular organization or group of people” [338]. The definition is “generous” inasmuch as it contains general concepts that can be illustrated by students’ own stories, by their real-life experience or, particularizing, by their information on corporate folklore. Also, one can extend the notion “group of people” to that of “nation” by asking students to consider “culture” in the light of “national identity” first, and then refer, in turn, to art achievements, vestiges, historical heritage, or linguistic and behavioural peculiarities.

As a starting point it is important, with ESP students, to stick to rather general definitions because they allow for a large area of applicability, and can be more easily modelled on a specific domain. A rather restrictive defining act like “activities involving music, literature, and other arts” [Macmillan 338] can also be introduced, together with the demand of motivating the narrowness of the perspective and, also, of extending the area of activities involved by “culture”. Technical or economics students will be the first to envisage the relevance of such concepts as “the Internet culture” or “cyberculture”; of “technical culture” in speaking, for instance, about a car make; of “economic culture” in considering, for example, stock exchange speculations. With business students the discussion could be extended, for instance, to “etiquette” as a metaphorical form of micro-culture (or as a cultural item) reflecting the relevance of behavioral codes in business meetings, in negotiations or, simply, for human resources departments or ordinary, everyday contacts at the office.

From our first considerations, one can, thus, derive *definition* and *exemplification* as the handiest didactic means able to introduce the concept of “culture” and

indirectly reinforce students' self-expression abilities. Following Edwards Lenkeit's identification of various ways of defining "culture", one can nevertheless reach other complementary methods of making "culture" a viable concept in students' consciousness.

The anthropologist's remark that "[e]arly definitions of culture focused on its components" [Edwards Lenkeit 28] suggests the immediately visible aspects of "culture". Describing "culture" through the prism of "knowledge, belief, art, law, morals, customs, and any other capabilities and habits...", or as, for instance, "historically created designs for living" [qtd. in Edwards Lenkeit 27] can provide a stimulating point of departure in designing culture-related assignments. Culture in its object-quality leads us to **object analysis** as a challenging, particularly appealing task that one can introduce as a lead-in stage in the "culture" activity or as a reinforcement exercise following generalities talk.

The materiality of culture representations is undeniable and, according to Matthieu Béra and Yvon Lamy, there is no culture beyond perceivable appearances, beyond "a plurality of material supports"[10]. According to Edwards Lenkeit, "[a]rtifacts and features provide a window into the minds and cultures of the people who make them." [27]. Symbolizing practices are particularly productive in the cultural field, and their occasional combinations with didactics can lead students to beneficial outcomes thanks to their activating a series of imaginative, deductive, or psychoanalytical abilities. In the light of Edwards Lenkeit's statement, one realizes that it can be useful for students to get involved in an activity of "reading" the object in its capacity as a singularized, separated "screen" hiding a whole universe of culturally-determined abstractions. One should remember that the exercise of inferring meanings from the concrete contributes to efficient learning by mainly stimulating the capacities for synthesizing and memorizing.

A first operation to take would be **decrypting** the specific features that a cultural object – a flag, a painting, a coat of arms, a doll, a postcard, a bottle etc – may display. The metonymic function of such objects leaves room for free interpretation and speculation about the representational practices of a larger entity like a particular ethnic group. The related discussion can be based on questions like *"What does it symbolize?"*; *"Which are the characteristics that make it relevant for the national space of... (name of the country)?"*; *"What symbolizing practices do you recognize in its design?"*; *"What historical event does it evoke?"*; *"What specific custom does it stand for?"*; *"What object/habit/custom in your own culture could be likened to this one?"*.

With ESP students, the metonymic approach may result in questions like *"How does the technology of ... (name of the country) reflect its national culture?"*, *"What culturally relevant features of object X can we identify?"*, or

“How does product X/brand Y reflect the national characteristics of...(name of the country)?”. Speculative or well documented, the answers will connect the student’s accumulation of specific terminology to a new signifying system and to the practice of symbolizing. The decoupage of reality together with the subjective selection of significant items are processes that the student supposedly performs in a reversed order, from the symbol-object to the initial object by thorough analysis, assumptions, arguments, value judgments.

The opposite operation, **encrypting**, can be equally used for didactic purposes by asking students to prepare, for instance, portfolios of cultural epitomes – representative objects, pictures, documents, books, songs etc attached each to a story behind. Thus students become indirect providers of meaning, performers of selection/interpretation acts and activators of a possibly dormant cultural consciousness. In motivating the relevance of their choices as well as in sustaining representativeness, they will use a rich language material, passive vocabulary will be activated, and linguistic tools for expressing opinions, for agreeing or disagreeing will be practised at length.

The practice of meaning allotment can be taken to more complex levels by employing a rather usual “ambassador game” in which the student, presumably finding himself in a foreign country for education or work, should think of the most adequate way of (re)presenting his/her own country by speaking, acting, or behaving in the most adequate way. Questions like *“What do you think foreigners do not know about us as a nation?”*, *“How could we define ‘cultural inadequacy’? What can it be caused by?”*, *“What is the importance of media in creating the cultural profile of a nation?”* can support the activity and act as efficient motivators considering that one of the most important functions fulfilled by cultural awareness is adaptation in a foreign environment. Additionally, one can divide the class into two groups, ask one of them to provide a list of “universal human values” that we share with another nation, and invite the other group to draw up a list of cultural differences between us and the respective nation. Through comparing and joining the two lists, students will depart with a clearer and more comfortable outlook on meeting foreigners, on travelling abroad for business or leisure.

Another defining trend that Edwards Lenkeit points out is “the process of how culture is acquired, shared, and transmitted.” [28] The statement indirectly puts forward the view on “culture” as learned behaviour. Elements like Kroeber and Kluckhohn’s “patterns [...] of and for behavior acquired and transmitted by symbols”, Linton’s “ideas, conditioned emotional responses, and patterns of habitual behavior”, or White and Dillingham’s “things and events dependent upon symboling practices” [qtd. in Edwards Lenkeit 30] are included into a series of

definitions clustering around a processual and evolutionary vision, and shed light to the necessity of getting students involved in a more dynamic learning approach passing *from the contemplative stage to the participative one*.

Viewing the internalization of new behavioral codes as a must of this approach, students can be lured to the classical yet challenging form of practice known as *simulation*. Considering culturally heterogeneous human groups, simulation activities will revalue the idea of human contact and the necessity of successful communication in the workplace. In this sense, the “mythopoeic function” of “culture” that Luke Tredinnick signals as the tendency to give “meaning to our social experiences”[18] can be fully exploited through students’ manifest need to fit in the proposed context and establish an authentic social connection. Moreover, one should remember Jeremy Harmer’s remark that “[s]imulation and role-play can be used to encourage general oral fluency, or to train students for specific situations especially where they are studying ESP...” [19].

Concretely, intercultural meetings can translate as making somebody’s acquaintance, negotiating, transacting business or socializing. The teacher will reproduce such social acts following, if possible, the pertinent conditions recommended by Jeremy Harmer for simulated activities: “reality of function”(students’ internalization of the new role), “a simulated environment” (specification of the new circumstances) and “structure”(identification of the stages and the information needed for the activity). In reproducing real-life events, students will develop a cultural understanding manifested in detail, in terms of specific elements such as attitude, handshake, body language, apparel, relevance of the linguistic material. In bringing into the class the simulated microcultural environment, the teacher will also stake on suspense and on fun, on the entertaining atmosphere due to misunderstandings or misinterpretations of switched cultural codes and, generally, to the expository character of the didactic “show”.

Emphasizing, even more explicitly, behavioral pattern as a common denominator, Edwards Lenkeit’s third approach to definitions puts forward internal characteristics of “culture” manifested as difference and commonality among its members. Additionally, the accent on cultural reference points like “a set of control mechanisms” or “[means] that the members of a society use to cope with one another and with their world” [qtd. in Edwards Lenkeit 31] intimates an organic vision on culture. The researcher actually reinforces the idea by adding supplementary features of culture: its shared character and dynamic nature. Pointing out new facets of “culture” brings about the necessity of deeper introspection and reflective approach to a concept now better apprehended in the ESP class thanks to *debate*.

A series of didactic props can evidence the evolving character of “culture” getting students to reflect on such issues as *“Is the Romanians’ adoption of Halloween or Valentine’s Day a positive or a negative fact?”*, *“Has the Romanian culture been influenced by the Hungarian minority in our country?”*, *“Can we interpret the Roma population’s recent expulsion from France as a cultural clash?”* etc. The remarks that culture “changes internally through **innovations** and **inventions**” and that it “changes because of external influences through a process of **diffusion**” [34] extend our general perspective to ESP students’ concerns that can be didactically translated through such conversational activators as *“Is international scientific cooperation a viable concept nowadays? To what extent?”*, *“What is the impact of political life on this kind of cooperation?”*, *“Give examples of culturally determined scientific discoveries.”*, *“Can the boundaries of ‘etiquette’ be negotiated in actual business meetings? Give examples.”* Pertaining to the general area of human “meetings”, such discussions serve their communicative purpose by activating specific acts “like passing on information, persuading, justifying, defending [...] position, or arguing” [Frendo 74]. The yes-now polarities and the game of arguments will divide students into antagonistic groups, and will benefit speaking skills by in-class debates, but also individual documenting work by the preliminary preparation of the debate.

Complementarily, one can use other awareness-creating approaches by laying stress on interpersonal relations and empathetic skills. Looking at higher-education culture as the general background, one can proceed to the segmentation of variegated types of academic affinities. One can extend the perspective by viewing the group of students as a (form of) “subculture” representative, for instance, of the scientific field. Defining the general concept of “subculture” as “a group of people whose beliefs and ways of behaving make them different from the rest of society” [Macmillan 1429] and further explaining that “[t]hese groups share behaviors, values, attitudes, and artifacts among their members” [Edwards Lenkeit 35], the language teacher can pass on to particularization by asking such questions as *“What do you have in common with your peers in this group?”*, *“What common activities have you taken part in this year?”* or *“Does your group function as a subculture on a small scale? Why?”* *“Do you know any Arts student? Make a list of the differences between his/her academic interests and attitudes and your own. What adjustment difficulties do you think he/she would be confronted with if transferred to your faculty?”*. In this sense, the tutor can also ask students to list objects, values, and behaviours that they share with other members of this particular “subculture” - their group - thus enhancing the group’s professional awareness and their sense of identity.

Along those lines, with economics students, teaching the general concept of “culture” or “subculture” can be continued by introducing “corporate culture” as a

more familiar term with direct implications for students' professional development. "Organizational culture" described as "the psychology, attitudes, experiences, beliefs and values (personal and cultural values) of an organization" [Wikipedia] or "corporate culture" defined as "a combination of factors such as company values, working conditions, employee benefits, and even office design" [The Free Dictionary] shift the perspective from difference awareness to axiological criteria and the dynamics of human relationships. The analysis of recorded material - commercials, product presentations, conference speeches - will be an exercise able to bring to light cultural elements embedded in a company's official discourses. Also, students themselves can be asked to act - and prepare themselves in this sense - as a certain company's representatives under given circumstances: fairs, business meetings, advertisement sessions, academic visits, international forums. Moreover, the questions in ordinary conversations with students can be also adjusted to a wide range of issues generated by organizational concepts of "culture": *"Can you identify a culture of information in company X? What does it consist in?"*; *"Speak about the policy of "secrecy" in company Y."*; *"Speak about the dress code in the business world. How has it been altered in recent years?"*; or *"How do they treat newcomers in company Z? How are they usually integrated into the team?"* etc. Covering either a narrow or a larger semantic sphere, "culture" proves to be an amazingly productive notion allowing the teacher to juggle a variety of tasks and conceptual angles.

As one can conclusively deduce from all the above said, "culture" should be generally considered from multiple points of view, in its "national", "behavioral" and/or "professional" determination. It is recommendable for the teacher to create didactic conditions for a multivalent and flexible understanding of "culture". Moreover, even with (often technically minded) ESP students, the notion cannot be divorced from its general meanings centred round group invariables such as commonality, consensus, specificity, or difference. This is an important point that my paper tries to suggest: the necessary passage from a generally human problematics to issues of specialized interest with ESP students.

Teaching "culture" is not so much about introducing a completely new term as it is about inserting the concept into a network of significant elements, and thinking of it contextually, in the light of its relevant environment. In ESP bringing up "culture" means establishing the connection to the student's immediate interests and expectations. Didactically speaking, introducing the concept of "culture" and consolidating it should of necessity be achieved by following the three stages proposed here as the focus on ***object***, ***behaviour*** and ***dynamics***, as the passage from a more static and exact notion to a rather flexible and more abstractly-defined one understood in terms of evolution, change, interaction, mutability. In this sense, Roberta Edwards Lenkeit's observations on the understanding of "culture" - mainly

in the light of its **components, representation and functioning** - can provide a most useful, well-informed framework for didactic innovation.

Furthermore, one should not forget that problematizing “culture” in ESP classes is subsumed to the general aim of (introducing and) practising language items and reinforcing especially the productive skill of speaking. Yet, apart from its linguistic benefits, our “culture” lesson will succeed in providing the student’s professional profile with a new awareness, an integrative outlook, with an attitude, but also, with a *sine qua non* procedural device. In the ESP syllabus the “culture” element is, undoubtedly, pertinent and necessary.

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